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Introduction

Hi everybody, and welcome to Shattered Blossom! This is the first story I've almost entirely planned from start to finish, and another first with it being a serious Warriors story of mine that isn't being edited until it's completed. So, please bear in mind that this is a *very* rough draft!

The first 9 chapters have been written over the span of 2.5 years, so I've undoubtedly missed a few things and I can promise that it will likely take a while for me to finish writing it. If there are inconsistencies throughout the story or anything you think should be adjusted, kindly point them out, and they will be handled upon its completion.

I've learned a lot from Silverjaw's Sorrow (still a WIP) and Frecklesky's Heart, and I'm hoping that this new story can expand upon what I've discovered throughout the writing of those. The biggest things I've learned from them that I hope to improve upon here are more engaging side characters and a much more coherent plot.

Without further ado, I hope you guys can sit back, relax, and enjoy reading Shattered Blossom!

Art Credits:

N/A

What is Warrior Cats?

Warrior Cats is a bestselling book series created by a group of authors under the alias of Erin Hunter. The series formulates around various groups of sentient cats living off-the-grid and away from human companionship. These cats are dedicated to their beliefs and systems, and experience a plethora of drama, hardship, and even death as they quite literally fight to survive.

If you're confused about anything, you're welcome to ask, and I will happily explain.

The Warrior Code
(cited from the official Warrior Cats website)

1. Defend your Clan, even with your life. You may have friendships with cats from the other Clans, but your loyalty must remain to your Clan, as one day you may meet them in battle.

2. Do not hunt or trespass on another Clan's territory.

3. Elders and kits must be fed before apprentices and warriors. Unless they have permission, apprentices may not eat until they have hunted to feed the elders.

4. Prey is killed only to be eaten. Give thanks to StarClan for its life.

5. A kit must be at least six moons old to become an apprentice.

6. Newly appointed warriors will keep a silent vigil for one night after receiving their warrior name.

7. A cat cannot be made deputy without having mentored at least one apprentice.

8. The deputy will become Clan leader when the leader retires or dies.

9. After the death or retirement of the deputy, the new deputy must be chosen before moonhigh.

10. A gathering of all four Clans is held at the full moon during a truce that lasts for the night. There shall be no fighting among the Clans at this time.

11. Boundaries must be marked and checked daily. Challenge all trespassing cats.

12. No warrior may neglect a kit in pain or in danger, even if that kit is from a different Clan.

13. The word of the Clan leader is the warrior code.

14. An honorable warrior does not need to kill other cats to win his battles, unless they are outside the warrior code or it is necessary for self-defense.

The Medicine Cat Code

1. A medicine cat may not fall in love or take a mate.

2. A medicine cat may not have kits.

3. A medicine cat may only retire when their apprentice is ready to take their place.

4. A medicine cat shares dreams with only StarClan.

5. A medicine cat may only discuss dreams, prophecies, etc. with their leader or other medicine cats at the monthly meeting; dreams of an otherwise prophetic nature should not be disclosed to any outside parties, or any other cats in the Clan.

WARNING

This story has description of illness, violence, and animal death. If you cannot handle this type of content, you're welcome to leave.

For those of you who stay, please enjoy.

Allegiances

ThunderClan

LEADER:
Ripestar—peach colored she-cat with darker patches

DEPUTY:
Quaildapple—silver dappled she-cat with blue-green eyes
Apprentice: Sparkpaw

MEDICINE CAT:
Stumpwhisker—a mottled brown tom with twisted whiskers

WARRIORS
Flypelt—silver tabby tom
Blacksky—black tom
Oakstrike—black and white tom
Gorsefur—gray she-cat
Apprentice: Glazepaw
Larkbite—black tom with broad shoulders and a narrow muzzle
Apprentice: Smokepaw
Nimbletail—dusty brown tom with a short tail
Viperwing—cream and white patched she-cat
Amberclaw—fiery ginger tom
Grassystep—pale gray she-cat with bright green eyes
Cloudtuft—small white tom
Sedgeflight—sand colored she-cat with green-yellow eyes
Tawnyflame— ginger tabby she-cat
Mintstride—light gray tom with pale green eyes
Moondust—light gray she-cat
Bumbledusk—white and ginger tom
Ivystorm—
Puddlebounce—
Streamfur—
Eggtuft—
Stingear—

QUEENS:
Leafear—dark tabby she-cat with red ears *(mother to Cricketkit and Goosekit)*
Strikefeather—light gray she-cat *(mother to Nightkit and Cragkit)*
Vixensong—russet and white she-cat *(mother to Hollykit, Fleckkit, and Cardinalkit)*

KITS:
Cricketkit—dark brown she-kit
Goosekit—dusty brown tabby she-kit
Cragkit—dark gray tom with a narrow muzzle
Nightkit—black tom
Hollykit—russet tortoiseshell she-kit
Fleckkit—mute ginger tom
Cardinalkit—fluffy red tom

APPRENTICES:
Sparkpaw—pale ginger and white tom
Smokepaw—dark brown she-cat with black tabby stripes
Glazepaw—dusty brown and white she-cat with black tabby rings around her tail

ELDERS:
Rattail—old mottled brown she-cat with no ears and a hairless pink tail

RiverClan

Leader:
Chaffinchstar—blue-gray tom

Deputy:
Ferntail—

Medicine Cat:
Minnowsong—white and orange dappled she-cat

Queens:

Patchpetal—tortoiseshell and white she-cat

ShadowClan:

Leader:
Shalestar—black tom

Deputy:
Darkfrost—thick-furred black she-cat

Medicine Cat:
Morningshine—dark gray she-cat
Apprentice: Wasppaw

Warriors:
Heathertail—white and brown she-cat

WindClan:

Leader:
Kinkstar—black and white tom with a kinked tail

Deputy:
Fallowleap—golden-brown tabby she-cat

Medicine Cat:
Gravelnose—ancient gray tom

Kits:
Dapplekit—short black she-kit with pale dapples

Chapter One

Cragkit snuggled close to Strikefeather's soft belly, his nose buried in her warm, milk-scented fur. A gentle purr thrummed in his chest at the steady beat of his mother's heart, shrouding him in happiness and comfort.

His bliss was shattered in an instant as claws began to pummel his belly.

"Strikefeather!" Cragkit wailed, his amber eyes flashing with dismay. He squirmed to escape the writhing black shape beside him. "Nightkit's clawing at me again!"

A grunt expelled from Strikefeather's chest, and her feathery tail drew up between the two kittens. Nightkit's squirming subsided, and Cragkit's fright calmed as his mother's rough tongue rasped between his ears. "Another nightmare, Nightkit?" Strikefeather mumbled sleepily, turning to address the other tom.

"Yeah!" Nightkit nodded earnestly, blinking the sleep from his eyes. "This time, I dreamed that Cragkit looked at me. It was horrible!"

Strikefeather, though sluggish with exhaustion, gently cuffed the little black tom over the ears. "That's no way to speak about your brother."

"But it's true! He looks like a cat with a mouse's face!"

Cragkit scowled, flipping around to perch his paws on Strikefeather's tail. "Do not."

Nightkit thrust his muzzle in Cragkit's face. "Do too!"

Cragkit uttered a wordless growl, and instead of arguing any further, he squirmed back into the nook of Strikefeather's belly and buried his nose into her sweet-smelling fur. His body relaxed under

her warmth, and darkness began to creep up behind his eyelids.

Then, something fuzzy and heavy thumped onto his back.

"Nightkit!" Cragkit cried. He flipped around with a hiss and kicked angrily at Nightkit's side, pushing his brother away as the black tom pealed with laughter.

As soon as he was free of Cragkit's hold, Nightkit whirled around and launched himself at Cragkit. Cragkit rolled back into Strikefeather's belly with a squeak, squirming to escape as Nightkit began pummeling his face with his prickly kit-claws.

"Kits, that's enough!" Strikefeather rose abruptly to her paws, sending the two tom-kits rolling. They stared up at her with wide, scared eyes once they'd settled. "Go and play in camp with the other kits," she growled, her eyes weary. "I'm too tired to deal with your nonsense today."

"But Strikefeather," Cragkit protested feebly. "I'm tired, too!"

"You should've thought of that before you fought with Nightkit," Strikefeather scolded softly. She leaned forward and gingerly pressed her nose between his ears, then turned and did the same to his brother. "Now, run along and play. Be sure to stay in sight of the camp."

She flicked her gray tail, lightly brushing the two along. Cragkit stumbled over his sleepy paws, reluctant to move, but he gave himself an urgent shake to bring life to his body. With a scowl at Nightkit, he turned tail and scampered from the den before he could be lectured more.

Bright sunlight sparkled into the ravine and warmed his gray fur. It was hot and dry, but a cool breeze flooded through the cracks and prickled against his skin.

Cats milled about the camp, occupied with their own business. Some were sunbathing or sharing tongues, others were repairing dens, and the rest were fetching fresh-kill to eat and relax in the green-leaf sun. Much to Cragkit's delight, he realized that a few

warriors were even bringing a fresh haul of prey to the pile.

Sticking his tail high in the air behind him, he bounded across the clearing to where Bumbledusk and Grassystep were dragging a massive lump of gray fur across the earth.

"What is *that?"* He cried, prancing around the paws of the warriors. He leaned in to give the strange animal a sniff, before darting away and sniffing it from a new angle.

Grassystep dropped the fuzzy tail with an amused purr. "It's a squirrel."

Cragkit's eyes gleamed. "Can I try a bite?"

Bumbledusk and Grassystep exchanged uncertain glances. "You're too small to eat meat yet," Bumbledusk meowed. "Maybe in a quarter-moon or so, once your mother says it's okay."

"But I *am* big enough!" Cragkit argued.

A shadow fell across the ground. "No, you're not."

Cragkit turned with wide eyes to see Stumpwhisker staring down at him. The medicine cat's golden eyes were hard to see, and his figure was silhouetted by the afternoon sun. His twisted whiskers shivered slightly as a gentle breeze brushed through them.

"Oh," Cragkit squeaked, taking a frightened step back. "Okay!"

With fear twisting beneath his pelt, he backed quickly away from the warriors and medicine cat. He gulped and scampered off to find Nightkit again. Stumpwhisker was terrifying!

He found his brother wrestling with Hollykit, Fleckkit, and Cardinalkit. Behind them, the litter's beautiful russet mother, Vixensong, watched the four with her bright fox-yellow eyes. Occasionally, her gaze would flick attentively to Cragkit.

As he padded over to join the rest of the kits, he wondered absently where Cricketkit and Goosekit were. They were usually around camp somewhere, but he was yet to see them. Shaking out

his pelt, Cragkit pushed the thought away.

Hollykit was the first to notice him. With an eager gasp, she shoved Cardinalkit away with a mighty kick of her hind paws and shook out her red fur.

"Hi, Cragkit!" She mewled, swishing her bushy tail around behind her. "Do you want to play Warrior with us?"

Cragkit beamed. "Of course I do!"

"Right! Then I'll be Hollystar, and you can be my deputy."

"No, I'm Clan leader," Cardinalkit argued.

"And *I'm* the deputy," Nightkit added, puffing out his chest angrily.

Hollykit tilted her head. "Why don't we lead different Clans, then?"

Nightkit peeled back his lip. "If that's the case, we're ThunderClan."

Hollykit's tail lashed. "That's not fair. *We're* ThunderClan."

As the three kits bore down on each other, Cragkit's mind swirled. "Well, why don't we have two leaders and two deputies?" He suggested.

The quartet of kits turned to stare at him. Fleckkit lifted a paw and tapped Cragpaw on the nose with a quiet shake of his head.

"That's not how things work, mouse-brain," Nightkit snapped matter-of-factly. "Clans can only have *one* leader, *one* deputy, and *one* medicine cat."

The black tom wiggled his haunches and sprang. Cragkit cried out in surprise as he was tackled to the ground. Kicking fiercely, he managed to throw Nightkit off, only to turn and find Cardinalkit digging his sharp kit-claws into his fur.

Cragkit yowled, "Get off me!"

"No, ShadowClan warrior! You're in our territory!" The smaller red tom crowed as Fleckkit joined him in the assault.

Hollykit lunged forward and sank her claws into Cardinalkit's scruff, hauling him away. Fleckkit squealed and scampered back before his sister could grab him, too.

"Come on, you mange-pelts," Hollykit snapped. "This isn't fair."

"*Hollykit!"*

Hollykit flattened her ears at her mother's stern tone.

"Watch your tongue. Who taught you language like that?" The red queen narrowed her eyes sternly at the red she-kit.

"Amberclaw," Hollykit replied simply. "He said I can call Cardinalkit that when he's being a fox-heart." She twitched her tail with a defiant perk of her ears.

"Quit using language like that. Cardinalkit, play nicely," she chastised, flicking her thick tail.

"It's Cardinal*star*," the tom argued. "Leaders don't take orders from their mothers."

Vixensong fixed the little tom with a frown, mouth parted for a scolding, but a shrill wail interrupted her.

"My kits!" Leafear scampered over to Vixensong, her eyes round with alarm. "Vixensong, my kits are missing again!"

Vixensong's hackles raised. "Again? Leafear, you need to keep a better eye on those two." She glanced back at the five kits, who had clustered quietly together to watch the scene. "You lot, stay together and don't leave the camp. If you do, you'll be stuck in the nursery for the next moon."

Cragkit shuffled his paws as the russet queen gently slid her tail along Leafear's side. "Don't worry, we'll find them. Where did you

see them last?"

They jogged quickly away, towards the dirtplace.

Once they were out of earshot, Nightkit glanced at his denmates. "Let's play Fox Hunt!"

Excitement spurred in Cragkit's gut. "I call being a Warrior!"

"Me, too!"

"And me!"

"That settles it, then," Nightkit purred. "Fleckkit, you're going to be the Fox."

Fleckkit wordlessly frowned, before bobbing his head and lying on the ground. He placed his paws over his ears and squeezed his eyes shut.

Cragkit glanced around as his denmates scampered through the ravine. Various dens rose around them, and he spotted a screen of ferns draping over a yawning cavern. Flicking his tail, he trotted eagerly in its direction.

"Where are you going, Cragkit?"

Cragkit blinked over at Nightkit as the dark tom hurried by his side, amber eyes round with curiosity.

"Over there," he meowed, nodding towards the fern screen.

"Are we even allowed to go in there?" Nightkit tilted his head, his paws stumbling here and there as he struggled to keep up with his brother's brisk pace.

"Of course we are," Cragkit huffed. "It's part of the camp, isn't it?"

"I guess so..." Nightkit trailed off, focusing instead on placing one paw in front of the other.

The two kits faltered to a stop as the screen of ferns befell them.

Cragkit stared up at the swaying plants, awe swelling in his chest. Without another word, he gently nudged the screen aside and peered into the darkness of the den.

The air was musty. It was filled to the brim with sharp and sweet smells, all mingled together in a chaotic cacophony. Cragkit wrinkled his nose, but curiosity guided his paws as he weaseled inside. Nightkit poked his head past the sheet of ferns, golden eyes bright with curious excitement.

"Wow!" The little black tom mewed in awe. "This has to be Ripestar's den, right?"

"I guess so," Cragkit breathed. He padded forward, his gray tail high above his spine. "What are these?" He wondered, scampering over to the furthermost corner of the den.

Drawn out across a stone shelf was a wide variety of leaves, roots, and flowers. He perched his paws on the side and sniffed at them. Each plant had its own unique smell that swelled in his lungs. Some were bitter, some were bland, and some were so sweet, his mouth wouldn't stop watering.

"I dare you to try one." Nightkit peeked over Cragkit's shoulders.

"Which one?" Cragkit muttered thoughtfully.

"That one," Nightkit swished his tail to a clump of roots.

Cragkit leaned forward and sniffed it. "Ew, seriously? That's the stinkiest one!"

Nightkit bared his teeth in a grin. "Exactly."

"I'll only eat it if you do, too," Cragkit declared, glaring at his brother.

"That's fine. I'm not a coward!" Nightkit skipped over and wolfed down a large clump of the smelly roots, twisting his muzzle as he struggled to tear through the tough material. He gagged when he finally swallowed. "Gross!"

Cragkit purred in amusement and drew a paw up to the cluster of roots. He dragged a small pawful back and nibbled on it. A bitter taste swam over his tastebuds, sticky on his tongue. Cringing, he took a larger bite, crunching it roughly between his teeth, and swallowed. It struggled to claw its way down his throat, but he forced it past the urge to gag.

"I did it," he mewed, scrunching his nose as the thick stem finally settled.

He sniffed around and caught the fresh smell of water. He hurried over to a small stream that wove through the cracks in the floor. He lowered his head and lapped some up, washing away the revolting flavor of the roots. He sighed in relief.

He glanced over to see that Nightkit had joined him, licking fat droplets of water from his whiskers.

Suddenly, the ferns rustled.

The two kits exchanged a horrified look. Cragkit frantically glanced around. "Over here!" He hissed, spotting a nook in the wall.

The two kits scampered over, diving between the large slabs of stone just in time as Stumpwhisker slipped into the den. Cragkit's tiny body was pressed tightly up against Nightkit's. He could feel the pattering of his brother's heart.

Confusion stirred uncomfortably in Cragkit's gut as he watched through bated breath. Why was Stumpwhisker in there if it was Ripestar's den? As Cragkit watched the medicine cat hurry about the den, his mottled brown fur ruffled with worry, he realized with a start that they were not in the leader's den.

"This isn't Ripestar's den," he whispered urgently to Nightkit, whose face matched Cragkit's expression of horror. "This is Stumpwhisker's!"

"Be quiet," Nightkit hissed, wrapping his paws around Cragkit's muzzle.

The two watched, holding their breath as Stumpwhisker lowered

his nose to the ground. Quickly, the tom explored the display of herbs. He gave the roots a rudimentary sniff.

Stumpwhisker's eyes turned to the nook that the kits were hiding inside of. They narrowed sharply.

"Oh no," Cragkit breathed in horror.

The medicine cat marched to the crack and scooped a paw inside. Cragkit and Nightkit squealed in fright as he hooked his paw around them and pulled them out. Cragkit wriggled indignantly, his stomach churning in distress.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry," the kit wailed, squirming beneath the medicine cat's fierce hold of his scruff.

Suddenly, his twisting stomach cramped violently and a rush of acrid liquid surged up his throat. Cragkit retched. The contents of his stomach spilled out on the floor before him.

Stumpwhisker dropped the kits as together, they poured their stomachs onto the floor.

"What were you thinking?" Stumpwhisker snarled, staring angrily at the two kits. Lashing his tail, the tom stormed towards the slab and grabbed a mouthful of moss. He used it to wipe up the vomit.

Cragkit trembled. His throat felt raw and gross, and the awful flavor of stomach acid wouldn't flee his mouth. Suddenly, he heaved again.

Cragkit moaned in pain as he crumpled to the floor. Stumpwhisker's large paw gently stroked his back with surprising gentleness given how stormy his eyes were. A cat brushed into the den and froze at the scene.

"Gorsefur," Stumpwhisker acknowledged bitterly. "Please let Strikefeather know that her kits got into the burdock root. They'll be sick for a little while, and I need to keep an eye on them."

Gorsefur blinked in astonishment at the retching kittens. "Y-Yes, I'll go do that," she stammered with a swish of her tail. The gray

warrior quickly fled.

Cragkit flattened his ears against his skull. Strikefeather would be furious, he realized as he heaved again.

The two kits were stuck in the medicine den for what felt like moons. Cragkit was shivering with distress and pain while Stumpwhisker rushed back and forth with bundles of moss. Rather than cleaning the floor, the medicine cat now focused on hydrating the two kits, dipping the moss into the little stream. Every chance he got, Cragkit lapped up the cool, soothing liquid.

"Th-Thank you," the gray kit managed to squeak out.

Stumpwhisker huffed, clearly unamused. "Don't eat my herbs again, unless I tell you to," was all he said with a lash of his tail.

Finally, Cragkit's stomach seemed to ease. He sat there, shivering, for long-lasting heartbeats until he realized that it was finally over. He licked his dry lips and sighed in relief. He glanced over to Nightkit, who wasn't so fortunate.

Stumpwhisker hurried back with another bundle of moss and dropped it at Cragkit's paws. Cragkit eagerly drank it. Once he was finished, he blinked slowly up at Stumpwhisker.

"I think... I think it's over now," he mewed shakily.

Sumpwhisker placed a careful paw on Cragkit's side, feeling his stomach.

"You're right. Though, I'd suggest you stay in here in case it makes a fuss again. I already let your mother know that you'll be spending the night."

Cragkit blinked. "Can I sit in a nest?" He mewed softly. His paws ached from resting on the hard, cold earth, and he just wanted to curl up in a pool of soft moss.

Stumpwhisker passed a wad of water-soaked moss to Nightkit. Wordlessly, he scooped Cragkit into his jaws. The kit dangled by his scruff as the medicine cat padded over to a nest made of bracken

and moss, before dropping the kit into the fluffy material.

Cragkit purred his thanks, curling deep into the soft substance with a breath of relief. He relaxed marginally, his drooping eyes straying over to his brother, who still retched and heaved. Sympathy welled in his chest at the sight, and he turned his eyes away.

Eventually, Cragkit slipped off to sleep, his body worn down from his sickliness.

Chapter Two

Cragkit tackled Hollykit to the ground with a delightful purr. He pressed a paw firmly against her head, squashing it against the dirt.

"I did it!" He cried as the red she-cat pushed him away.

"Yeah, you did," she sourly huffed, twitching her nose with discontent. She craned her neck around to give her spine a long lick.

It had only been a moon since the incident in the medicine den, aging Cragkit and Nightkit at about two moons and a half. Cragkit and Nightkit had been weaned not too long ago, and their first taste of prey—a freshly caught mouse—had been *amazing*.

Cragkit was also proving to be a good fighter—at least in comparison to the other kits. His shoulders were already beginning to broaden, and he was showing to be bulkier and his muzzle narrower, much like his father, while Nightkit was slim like their mother. Regardless of their primary differences, they both shared notably wider ears.

Cricketkit and Goosekit—now Cricketpaw and Goosepaw—had been promoted to apprenticeship. The two older she-cats dropped by occasionally to help the kits with their fighting moves, but the time they spent visiting was few and far in between. Cragkit couldn't help but feel a twinge of resentment as they scampered into camp behind their mentors, eyes sparkling with glee and mice dangling from their mouths.

Cragkit harrumphed and turned his eyes back to the area where his friends played.

Sedgeflight, the beautiful sandy-furred queen, had retired to the nursery a little less than a moon ago. She currently bathed in the sun, lounging comfortably on her side as she watched the kits, a soft mystification shimmering in her eyes as she watched them roll

around. Glazepaw was among the kits, teaching Cardinalkit a hunter's crouch with a paw cresting over his spine as she readjusted him, mewing words of gentle critique. Strikefeather and Vixensong were absent; out hunting to relieve their cramped muscles from their long confinement in the nursery.

Cragkit's eyes strayed to the medicine den. He could hear the faint coughs of Quaildapple, the beautiful deputy. According to his mother, she had caught a bad case of greencough, and he was strictly informed to steer clear of Stumpwhisker's den until she was feeling better. Even with the warning, he was deathly curious.

Hollykit swatted Cragkit over the ears. "Are you even listening, fox-breath?" She hissed, the vulgar phrase rolling easily off her tongue.

Cragkit snapped his head up. "Sorry," he blurted. "I zoned out. What was it you said?"

"I *said*, we're going to be playing Warrior. Glazepaw's going to teach us some battle moves. Won't you join us?"

Cragkit tilted his head. "Maybe later," he murmured, his eyes straying back to the sheet of waving ferns.

Hollykit narrowed her eyes. "Can't you just take your head out of the clouds for once?"

Cragkit shrugged absently, and with an annoyed huff, Hollykit strutted away to rejoin the other three toms and the apprentice.

Cragkit heard their giggles and play-fighting from where he sat, his thin tail curled over his paws. Though playing was fun, he couldn't help but wonder about the responsibilities of Stumpwhisker. The tom, even though he'd been furious that the kits had broken into his herb store, had cared so tenderly for both he and his brother. The day following the incident, he had taught the two of them why it was so terrible to eat the herbs, even if they didn't give nasty side effects like the burdock root did.

Every leaf, every root, and every seed had its own purpose for

the Clan. Some could cure colds, some could heal burns, and others could make cats sick, just as the roots had done to Nightkit and Cragkit.

Cragkit never saw Stumpwhisker relax. He was always busy doing *something.* Be he leaving camp to fetch herbs, sorting his storage, or even tending to cats and their ailments, the tom was always busy—and his duties fascinated the young kit.

Curiosity tempted him like the taste of warm fresh-kill. Cragkit glanced around the clearing, but it was empty aside from his denmates, Glazepaw, and Sedgeflight. It was a few hours past sun-high, which meant most of the Clan was out and about in the territory.

With excitement tingling in his fur, Cragkit scampered across the clearing. As he ran, he cast wary, excited glances over his shoulders, but it appeared that Sedgeflight had dozed off. He reached the sheet of ferns, poking his nose past the creeping leaves and into the den.

The sweet, sour, and sticky smells swamped his nose immediately.

Before he could take the first step inside, Cragkit felt a tug at his tail.

"What are you doing?"

Cragkit turned around with a scowl, tucking his tail to his side, only to find himself face-to-face with his brother. Nightkit's head was inclined thoughtfully to the side, his yellow eyes bright with curiosity. "Cragkit?" He prompted.

"I'm just looking," Cragkit puffed, shame smoldering in his ears.

"Looking for what?" Nightkit pressed.

"I wanted to see what Stumpwhisker was doing with Quaildapple," he explained, giving an exasperated twitch of his whiskers. "Happy?"

Nightkit shrugged. "Sure."

Cragkit flicked his tail in annoyance. "Why'd you stop playing Warrior, anyways? I thought you loved being the leader."

"I was curious, too. Duh." Nightkit curled his tail. "If I'm going to be a medicine cat apprentice, I need to know what he's up to."

Cragkit blinked in surprise. "You want to be a medicine cat apprentice?"

"Well, yeah. Don't you?"

Cragkit tilted his head thoughtfully. Did he want to be like Stumpwhisker? Harrowed with responsibility, struggling beneath the weight of the Clan on his shoulders? Did he want to tend to his Clanmates for the rest of the days and know all of the herbs in the forest, both by name and use? "Of course I do," he snapped as if Nightkit had clawed his ears. "Why wouldn't I?"

Nightkit shrugged. "I don't know, because you're a mouse?"

Cragkit peeled back his lip, but his brother had already slipped off into the den. "Wait for me, you flea-pelt!" He bristled, charging in after him.

Darkness swallowed them whole.

Rattling breaths encroached the air, shaky and urgent. Nightkit's eyes, illuminated in the dim light of the fern tunnel, flashed anxiously as they slowly crept into the den. The two stuck close together, their squabble forgotten beneath the intensity of the atmosphere.

Deep within, they found the beautiful silver dappled deputy splayed in her nest. Her sides shuddered with each breath, and a mysterious black liquid dribbled at the corners of her mouth. Cragkit inched forward, curiosity sprouting like a blossom to the very tip of his muzzle.

"What do you think is wrong with her?" Nightkit queried, creeping alongside his brother.

"I don't know. Strikefeather said it's greencough," Cragkit

answered, sniffing the air. *What does it smell like?* He wondered, tasting nothing but the overwhelming aroma of herbs.

Cragkit pricked his ears as he edged closer to the deputy's side. He stretched his neck over the brim of the nest, drawing a paw forward as his curiosity extended.

"*Stop!"*

Cragkit withdrew in a flash, his fur spiking in fright. Nightkit yelped as he spun around, and the two pressed themselves close to the floor as they spotted Stumpwhisker's hulking figure blotting out the sun. Cragkit wished the ground would swallow him whole.

"You two *again?"* The medicine cat roared.

His golden eyes darting between the two kits, Stumpwhisker stormed inside. With one deft swoop, he snatched them by the scruffs and thundered out of the den. Cragkit squirmed with squeals of protest.

"We didn't mean to! We just wanted to know what was wrong!" He cried, clawing at the air.

Nightkit hissed as their dangling forms collided, and Cragkit grew still, his heart pattering like a frantic bird. Hollykit, Cardinalkit, and Fleckkit all watched the spectacle with wide eyes.

Cragkit was careened to the ground with an *'umph!'*, his muzzle smacking uncomfortably against the soil. He indignantly fluffed out his kitten-soft fur as he spun around to face Stumpwhisker.

"That hurt!" He squeaked furiously.

Stumpwhisker's mottled brown fur bristled, and his twisted whiskers quivered with rage. Cragkit cowered after an instant, drawing his eyes to the ground.

"What did I tell you two about entering my den without permission?" Stumpwhisker snarled, lowering his head to be level with the kits.

His hot, stinky breath billowed across Cragkit's face, and the little tom wrinkled his nose with distaste.

"You said not to do it," Nightkit replied meekly, head bowed low in shame.

Cragkit puffed out his chest. "Ripestar said that we should indulge our curiosity! I was only curious," he exclaimed.

Stumpwhisker's muzzle twitched. "You're right. Your curiosity should be indulged, but you must listen to your elders first," he growled. Cragkit flattened his ears as the tom continued, "I am your medicine cat. You must obey my orders. After all, I only have your best interest at heart."

The tom sighed, and turned his eyes to Sedgeflight, who groggily looked over at them. A small flicker of alarm entered her bright eyes, and without grooming her messy pelt, she ushered the other three kits back to the nursery and hurried over.

"Stumpwhisker, what happened?" She asked softly, her voice as light as clouds.

Stumpwhisker glided his tail over Nightkit and Cragkit's ears. Cragkit flinched at the touch. "You need to keep a better eye on the kits," he snapped. "These two were found exploring my den, *again*."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Sedgeflight mewed softly, flattening her ears. "You two, come over now."

The queen padded towards the kits, but Stumpwhisker stepped in her way. "Not so fast," he ordered. "These two got in close proximity to Quaildapple."

Sedgeflight flinched. "They did?"

"They did. I need to quarantine them for a few sunrises to make sure they didn't catch the illness."

Cragkit craned his neck. "I didn't catch *anything*."

Stumpwhisker expelled a shaky breath, and Cragkit swallowed

the rebuke that had bubbled up in his throat. Nightkit shot his gray littermate a glare.

"Then... what should I do?" Sedgeflight asked, her words slow as if she were treading on thin ice.

"Firstly, you'll need to keep watch over Vixensong's kits. Secondly, you'll have to tell Strikefeather what happened." Stumpwhisker's eyes narrowed. "I doubt she'll be pleased."

"No, I don't think she will," the young queen solemnly agreed.

Stumpwhisker snorted. "Go on then, make sure the rest stay out of trouble."

"Yes, Stumpwhisker. I'm sorry."

Stumpwhisker twitched his whiskers. Cragkit couldn't tell if it was out of amusement or annoyance, but from the expression on the old tom's face, he doubted it was the former. Sedgeflight, with one last glance at the two kits, turned tail and returned to the nursery. Cragkit could see Hollykit and Cardinalkit watching from just outside of it, their eyes wide. At Sedgeflight's approach, the two scampered into the den.

Cragkit wiggled his tail and began to skip forward.

"Oh, no you don't!" Stumpwhisker flashed a paw forward and scooped it around Cragkit's front, dragging the disgruntled kit closer. "You'll be staying with me."

Cragkit pouted. "But why?"

"You were exposed to a serious sickness when you decided to visit my den," Stumpwhisker explained. "I will be keeping the two of you close to make sure you didn't catch it."

Nightkit tilted his head thoughtfully. "Okay."

Cragkit frowned, his paws itching with irritation. How could Nightkit be so accepting of this? He didn't want to be stuck inside!

With his tail dragging in the dirt, Cragkit followed Stumpwhisker to their quarantine.

Chapter Three

Lightning flashed and thunder roared. Cragkit squirmed closer to Strikefeather's belly, seeking warmth from the chilly air. He was four moons old now, nearly too big to share the nest with his mother and Nightkit anymore.

Hollykit, Cardinalkit, and Fleckkit were growing quickly as well. The nursery was feeling cramped, and it didn't help that Sedgeflight's belly was so big.

Suddenly, a low moan rose from within the den. Cragkit poked his head up, amber eyes dilating to the darkness. Sedgeflight was hunched over in her nest, clear pain drawn across her face. The little gray tom froze.

"Strikefeather!" He exclaimed, turning to his mother and urgently prodding her side. "Strikefeather, wake up!"

Strikefeather stirred, blinking open her amber eyes. "What is it, Cragkit?" The queen sighed, drawing her gaze to the tom.

Cragkit lifted his eyes to hers, round like twin amber moons. "Something's wrong with Sedgeflight," he mewled, wrapping his tail anxiously around his haunches.

Strikefeather burst to her paws, waking Nightkit with her sudden movement. The black tom squeaked in frustration, casting a sour glare to his mother.

Strikefeather, ignoring her son's protests, hurried to Sedgeflight's side. "Are you all right? What hurts?" She fretted, gently cresting a paw over the queen's swollen stomach.

"I think..." Sedgeflight's face screwed up amid the pain. "I think my kits are coming."

"I'll go fetch Stumpwhisker for you," Strikefeather promised,

pressing her nose gently to the queen's forehead. "Cragkit," the tom stood at attention as his mother addressed him, "wake the others and take them to the elder's den."

"To the elder's den? Through the storm?" Cragkit gasped.

"Yes, through the storm."

"But—"

"Cragkit, do as I say!"

Strikefeather lashed her tail and darted outside without another word. Cragkit stood, frozen in shock, before shaking himself out of his dazed state. He hurried to Vixensong's side and urgently nudged the queen awake.

Vixensong's sharp yellow eyes fluttered open, stuttering like the gentle wings of a butterfly. "What's going on, Cragkit?" She mumbled.

"Strikefeather said to get everybody out of the den," he proclaimed, sticking his tail out and puffing his chest. "I think Sedgeflight's kits are coming."

Vixensong stretched to her paws and nudged her three kits awake, who protested softly. "You three, go outside with Cragkit," she purred. "Sedgeflight's kits are coming, and she's going to need my help. Don't get into any trouble," she looked pointedly at Cragkit when she said this.

Heat rushed to his ears. "I won't," he vowed, fluffing out his fur fiercely. "Come on, guys!"

Cragkit quickly urged his friends to their paws, then he turned to Nightkit, who had slipped straight back to sleep even through the ambience of wails and rain. He prodded his reluctant brother awake.

Thunder crashed through the air, drowning out Sedgeflight's agony. With an audible protest, the five kits scrambled out of the den. Cragkit found himself face-to-face with Stumpwhisker, whose thick

fur was drenched with rainwater and his head ducked low to protect the precious herbs from the downpour.

Twitching his whiskers, Cragkit scampered to the side, and the medicine cat dove into the nursery. The little tom exchanged glances with his denmates, who were now as soaked as he was.

"Hurry! The elder's den is over here," he cried, shaking out his fur and beginning the agonizing trek.

The kits all blinked at him blearily, but they offered little complaint as they hurried across the rain-soaked clearing. There were so many puddles that their paws constantly splashed, and Cragkit was drenched in muddy water up to his belly fur.

The camp lit up with a blinding flash of purplish-blue lightning. An instant passed before the deafening eruption of thunder joined the harsh light.

With squeaks of alarm, the five kits quickened their pace. In one final bound, Cragkit launched himself into the hollow trunk of the elder's den. Darkness swallowed him, and the tumultuous downpour eased to the hollow pattering on the bark of the cavernous trunk. The other kits hurried in behind him, shivering and cold. Cragkit noticed, after just a few moments, that he was shivering as well.

Beady yellow eyes blinked at the collection of kits.

"What're you lot doing here so late?" A voice rasped. Rattail crept out from the shadows.

Cragkit stared at the old she-cat. Her brown mottled fur was sprinkled with aged silver hairs, and her pelt hung loosely from her skin. The little holes where ears should be always frightened him, and her long, hairless tail—burnt off in a raging fire—was equally as unsettling. As per her namesake, it supposedly looked like a rat's tail.

"Mother said Sedgeflight is having kits," Hollykit mewed brightly.

"Kits?" Rattail rumbled, her eyes gleaming with soft joy. "Oh, isn't that delightful."

Thunder boomed, resonating in her words. Fleckkit squeaked wordlessly and tucked his tail close, crouching low.

Rattail's eyes glittered. "Come," she mewed, ducking further into the den. "Let me tell you where thunder comes from."

Cragkit exchanged glances with Nightkit.

"A story!" His brother exclaimed.

The kits all followed the elder deeper within the hollow log.

"Now, gather close," Rattail hissed, curling into her nest. The kits scrambled onto the moss, and Cragkit hesitated as he stepped over her bare tail. As he settled into the soft greenery, he found himself immediately enraptured by her raspy, intricate tone. His amber eyes widened. The fear that overwhelmed him only a moment ago was swept away by the next clap of thunder. "Long ago, before our Clans became what they are now..."

"Even ThunderClan?" Cardinalkit squeaked.

"Hush," Rattail chided. "But yes, even ThunderClan."

"ThunderClan hasn't always been here?" Hollykit chimed in, her voice tight with confusion.

"No, ThunderClan hasn't always been here."

As Hollykit opened her mouth again, Nightkit huffed and shoved her with his shoulders. "Shut up already and let her finish."

"Be kind to each other," Rattail softly scolded, her tail softly batting Nightkit over the ears. The tom shrank down with a scowl. She continued, "Before the Clans as we know them roamed the forest, four great Clans roamed these lands—cats taller than trees with the fiercest of roars. ThunderClan originated from the Clan of Lions, a group filled to the brim with the most loyal of cats, embroidered at the necks with thick, golden manes."

"I've heard of lions!" Hollykit chirped. "Mother told me about them when I was two moons old. She said... she said they're the fiercest

cats known to the Clans!" She glanced around, then gasped. "Didn't RiverClan come from tigers?"

"That they did," Rattail purred, leaning forward to give the she-kit a warm rasp between the ears. "All of the ancient Clans are long gone, yet their key traits can be seen in the Clans we know today."

Hollykit thrummed happily and squirmed closer to Rattail, settling her chin on the elder's forepaw.

"When storms shake the sky," Rattail resumed, her golden eyes glittering with something akin to wonder, "LionClan is fighting with the other Clans. The flash of lightning is the swipe of their claws," as she said this, a blinding glow darted across the den's walls, "and the crash of thunder is the defeat of an enemy." A shuddering rumble shook through the air.

"What are they fighting over?" Cragkit inquired.

"Perhaps territory," Rattail mewed thoughtfully. "Though, it could also just be a training session. There's no way for us to know, not unless we join them among the clouds."

"If LionClan lives above us," Nighttkit began hesitantly, "then... where is StarClan?"

"LionClan lives among the clouds," Rattail explained. "StarClan lives far above them, among the stars."

"Woah," Cragkit breathed.

A soft purr rose to Rattail's chest as she looked at the cluster of kits. "That's enough storytelling for now, kits. You'd best get some sleep while you wait for your mothers. There's no telling how long Sedgeflight will be kitting for."

Cragkit bobbed his head in agreement, only now realizing just how heavily his tiredness weighed down on him. Rattail shuffled to the side, leaving room for the five kits to curl up beside her.

Cragkit blinked as he realized that her nest was actually big enough for all of them to fit. He picked his paws over the rim of moss and

stepped inside, curling up against her flank and draping his tail over his nose.

"Why is your nest so big?" Cardinalkit mewed as he nestled inside.

Rattail smiled softly. "I used to share it with my mate. Rest now," she nuzzled each kit in turn. "I'll watch over you."

Cragkit snuggled close to his denmates. As Rattail's warm yellow eyes lingered over them, the young tom's eyes slid shut.

His dreams were swept away by thoughts of maned lions in a fierce battle with similarly massive cats, the ferocious beasts rolling around in the flickering thunderheads above.

Well into the night, when the thunder had ended and the pouring rain had eased into a soft drizzle, Strikefeather entered the den to fetch Cragkit and Nightkit. Rattail bode the kits and their mother farewell as they padded, weary-pawed, out into the wet clearing.

Cragkit's paws trembled with exhaustion as Strikefeather led him and his brother quietly back into the nursery. His amber eyes flashed towards Sedgeflight, whose flank rose and fell steadily around three adorable bundles of fluff.

"May I?" He asked sleepily, casting his tired eyes to his mother.

"You may," Strikefeather encouraged, giving the drained kit a gentle nudge.

Cragkit blinked his heavy eyes and curiously approached Sedgeflight's nest. He peered down at the crook of her stomach where three bundles of fur suckled happily. A little ginger and white she-kit pawed at her sister's white ears, and the last one, a sandy-furred she-kit, nestled close to her mother's belly.

"Wow," Cragkit breathed. "Was I this small once?"

Sedgeflight let out a soft *mrrow* of amusement. "Yes, you were. All of us were so little, at some point in time."

"Have you named them?"

"Not yet," Sedgeflight bumped her ginger kit with her nose, guiding the tiny she-cat to her belly. "I'll be naming them with Oakstrike in the morning."

"Is he your mate?" Nightkit propped his paws on Cragkit's back, craning his neck curiously as he peered into the nest.

Cragkit jolted, but didn't budge for fear of disturbing the three newborns.

"Yes, he's my mate. He had a long day yesterday, so I told Vixensong not to fetch him." Her eyes gleamed in amusement as a soft purr trembled in her lungs. "She wasn't too pleased."

The queen sighed happily and lowered her head to the soft cushion of moss, her yellow-green eyes drooping with exhaustion. Cragkit and Nightkit exchanged glances. Nightkit relinquished his hold on Cragkit's back, and the two quietly wished Sedgeflight a good night. The kits padded over to their mother, who gave them each a gentle lick between the ears.

"What did you think?" Strikefeather queried, curling up around the toms as they nestled at her belly.

Nightkit blinked happily. "It was a *miracle*," He purred.

Cragkit nodded eagerly. "Did Stumpwhisker really help her give birth?"

"Yes, he did," Strikefeather smiled at the two. "Medicine cats know, better than even all the queens in this Clan, how to help a mother through birth. He has special herbs and tactics to make the experience easier."

"Wow," Cragkit breathed, burying his nose into Strikefeather's fluffy belly fur. The soft, sweet smell of milk sprang to his tongue, mixed with the taste of heather.

"Settle down now," Strikefeather purred, drawing her tongue across Cragkit's fur, lapping away at the mud that clung to it. "It's time for you to sleep."

As Cragkit relaxed under his mother's gentle grooming, his thoughts meandered over the events of the night. Stumpwhisker was a cat to behold. Wise, methodical, and so, so very helpful to the Clan. If medicine cats could make miracles, Cragkit wanted to make miracles, too. He knew, with every fiber of his being, that his destiny was to become ThunderClan's next medicine cat.

With a purr thrumming in his throat, Cragkit fell into a deep slumber.

Chapter Four

Cragkit trembled with excitement.

Strikefeather swept forward and grabbed him by the scruff. She dragged the squirming tom backwards and began to briskly groom his fur.

"Strikefeather!" Cragkit wailed, battering at his mother's belly in a desperate attempt to pry himself away. "I washed my fur already! Clean Nightkit instead, *he's* rolling in the dirt with Cardinalkit again."

Strikefeather thrummed with amusement as she finished smoothing a tuft of fur on Cragkit's rump. She freed him, and he indignantly shook out his fur, lapping rebelliously at a spot on his shoulder that she'd messed up.

"You need to present yourself to the Clan at your best. Your mother is only helping," a deep voice mewed proudly.

Cragkit turned around, and his amber eyes grew wide. "Larkbite!" He purred.

The black tom blinked his amber eyes happily at the dark gray kit. Cragkit scrambled forward and buried his nose in the warrior's—no, the new deputy's—chest. The little tom could barely hear Nightkit's squeals of protest and Strikefeather's amused purring as he embraced his father.

"You're not going to miss our ceremony!" Cragkit trilled happily, wearing the world's biggest grin as he stared up at his father, a cat often so busy with his warrior duties that he couldn't visit his kin.

"I wouldn't miss it even if the forest was on fire." Larkbite's eyes glowed with pride as he leaned down. Cragkit happily nuzzled his chin.

"Great StarClan, I'm free!" Nightkit puffed, scampering to Cragkit's side with a light glare cast in Strikefeather's direction. Strikefeather chuckled, and as Nightkit's gaze shifted to the black tom before him, his eyes brightened. "Larkbite, you're here!"

"That's right. Look at you two, all nice and groomed. I'm proud to say that you're ready for your apprentice ceremony!" Larkbite smiled warmly at the two kits, who squirmed with excitement.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Highrock for a Clan meeting!"

"It's time!" Nightkit squealed as Ripestar's voice resonated throughout the camp.

Cragkit shot a glance back towards the nursery where Hollykit, Cardinalkit, and Fleckkit all watched patiently. Beside them were Sedgeflight's kits; Flowerkit, Dawnkit, and Slightkit. In contrast, those three were fighting each other for the best view with shrill squeals of excitement. Sedgeflight gently scolded the trio and swept them close with a grand whisk of her tail. The kits struggled feebly until finally, they calmed down and watched the ceremony with wide, eager eyes.

Hollykit tore her eyes away from the younger kits and caught Cragkit's attention. She sent him an excited smile.

Larkbite gave Cragkit and Nightkit a prompting nudge.

Cragkit gave his pelt a firm shake and puffed out his chest, setting his broad shoulders. The dark gray tom padded forward. A slight tremble entered his whiskers, and he felt Nightkit's fur brush against his. He shot a look in his brother's direction. The black tom was a mirror of his nervous excitement.

Ripestar stood, noble and proud atop the Highrock. Her peach-colored fur stood in a bright contrast to her deep, icy blue eyes, and she searched the Clan with her sharp gaze. At last, she found the two kits, and the cold fringes of her eyes softened into warm blossoms of pride.

Cragkit realized with a start that Ripestar wasn't the only one who watched the two toms. The entire Clan followed their movements with their eyes. The gray tom's spine prickled beneath the watchful gazes of his Clanmates.

At last, Cragkit and Nightkit reached the Highrock. The brothers settled in the dust with their tails curled primly over their paws.

"It is at times like these where I am most proud to lead ThunderClan," Ripestar began. Her voice rang loudly throughout the ravine. Soft, yet commanding, and rich with every word, "every birth, death, apprenticeship, warriorship, and retirement marks an important milestone for our Clan. And today, though Quaildapple's passing lingers heavily on our minds, we are here to celebrate the coming of new apprentices."

Ripestar smiled down at the kits. "Cragkit, Nightkit," she mewed, "you have both come forward and requested to become medicine cats in-training. After due consideration and discussion with Stumpwhisker," she flicked her tail to the medicine cat, who bowed his head politely, "we have decided that the two of you will embark on this journey together."

Cragkit perked up with a startled glance in Nightkit's direction. Though, he wasn't too terribly surprised, considering how his brother had shown an equal fascination to Stumpwhisker's duties.

"From this day onward, until you receive your medicine cat names, you will be known as Cragpaw and Nightpaw. Stumpwhisker, I entrust you to teach these cats the ways of healing and how to protect the Clan from the most dangerous of ailments."

Stumpwhisker dipped his head as the Clan began cheering the apprentices' new names; "Cragpaw! Nightpaw! Cragpaw! Nightpaw!"

The medicine cat strutted forward with his thick tail hovering over his spine, sweeping the young toms with his green optics. "At the next half-moon Gathering, you both must journey to the Moonstone to be accepted by StarClan before the other medicine cats."

Nightkit and Cragkit exchanged glances, excitement reflecting in their eyes. "Okay!" Cragpaw squeaked, his tail flicking around behind him.

Stumpwhisker leaned forward and gently touched his nose to Cragpaw's forehead. The tom stilled. Stumpwhisker's breath brushed across his fur, until at last the older tom withdrew and did the same to Nightpaw.

Stumpwhisker smiled and turned away, leaving the newly-made apprentices to face the onslaught of congratulations. Warriors pressed in around the brothers, familiar faces that Cragpaw had never directly addressed before murmured their praise, and he felt heat rushing beneath his pelt as he profusely thanked each cat.

"It's a shame we won't be having more cats in the apprentice's den," Cricketpaw sighed, flicking her dark tail along Cragpaw's spine. "I was looking forward to seeing the two of you again."

Cragpaw's nose furrowed. "You're the one who never visited us," He pointed out to the older she-cat.

Cricketpaw shrugged. "Moondust keeps me busy."

"It's been four moons! I'm sure you haven't been *that* busy," Nightpaw retorted, frowning at the older apprentice.

Cricketpaw blinked. "Sorry, *I guess*," she grunted. Her gaze flashed back to the two apprentices, her body growing still aside from the blink of her eyes. "Anyways, congratulations to you two. I hope you look forward to taking care of Rattail's ticks." Her whiskers shivered in amusement, and she bounded away to join Goosepaw at the apprentice's den.

Nightpaw and Cragpaw exchanged glances.

"Is she angry?" Cragpaw asked cautiously.

Nightpaw shrugged. "Probably."

The two toms fell into silence, until the sound of rapidly approaching pawsteps touched the tufts of Cragpaw's ears.

"I'm so happy for you two!" A shrill voice squealed.

Cragpaw turned around to see Hollykit sprinting towards him. Just past her shoulders, Fleckkit and Cardinalkit raced only a few whisker-length's behind.

The red she-kit skidded to a stop and butted her nose to Nightpaw's. Then, she turned to look at Cragpaw.

"Why did you choose to be a medicine cat?" She mewed, giving a quick flick of her whiskers.

"What Stumpwhisker does is truly admirable," Cragpaw explained with a tilt of his head.

Hollykit's nose quivered. "Same with Ripestar. Why not be a warrior?"

Cragpaw shrugged. "I like herbs."

Hollykit turned her curious eyes to Nightpaw, a small glitter of extra warmth swarming through her green eyes. "And you?"

"The same reasons as Cragpaw," he mewed proudly. "I want to be just like Stumpwhisker, helping the Clan where I can. With herbs and omens, not with teeth and claws."

Hollykit's eyes widened in awe. Cardinalkit bowled her over.

"Boring!" The tom groaned, a frown puckering his lips. "Who am I going to train to be a warrior with now?"

Nightpaw laughed. "Hollykit and Fleckkit, of course."

"Hollykit talks too much. And Fleckkit is... you know, *Fleckkit*." Cardinalkit cast an apologetic glance to his brother, whose tail drooped a little.

"Yeah, well at least we're not lame like you," Hollykit snorted, flicking her tail angrily on Cardinalkit's nose. "Fleckkit is perfect as he is. Right, Fleckkit?"

Fleckkit bobbed his head happily.

Cragpaw smiled softly at the trio of kits. His friends. "Just because we're training to be medicine cats doesn't mean we won't be able to train together," he pointed out.

"That's right."

Cragpaw twisted his head around to see that Strikefeather had come over. His fur bristled as she gave him a long lick between the ears.

"Strikefeather!" He protested, pawing reluctantly at her nose.

"Although you two are becoming medicine cats, this doesn't mean you have to end your friendships." Strikefeather pulled the squirming Nightpaw closer and gave him a brisk lick as well. "Our medicine cats are a precious asset to the Clan. Losing one is a great blow, and that's why Stumpwhisker will teach you the very basics of battle training."

Cragpaw tilted his head with a slight frown. "Only the basics?" He asked, craning his neck to look at his mother.

Strikefeather purred. "Yes, didn't you know? Your focus will be on herbs and prophecies. Only the basics are needed to protect yourself, especially with the entire Clan behind you."

Cragpaw frowned a little, but gave an understanding nod.

"Anyways," Strikefeather turned her gaze to the three gathered kits, "you three had best run back to the nursery. Vixensong is looking for you."

She smiled as the three kits whirled around, only to see Vixensong watching them through slitted eyes at the nursery entrance.

Hollykit let out a begrudging sigh, and turned back to Nightpaw and Cragpaw. She touched her nose briefly to Cragpaw's, then gently nuzzled Nightpaw's chin.

"Goodbye, you two. I'll miss sharing the same den!" She called over her shoulder as she bounded away, brothers at her side.

"I'm off on patrol now," Strikefeather mewed to the young toms, her eyes soft with warmth and affection. "Go on and meet with Stumpwhisker. I'm sure he has plenty to say to you."

Cragpaw nodded and tilted his head as Strikefeather briskly walked away, towards the tunnel that led out of the ravine. His paws prickled with excitement. Soon, he and Nightpaw would be leaving through there. The territory was theirs to explore—he was officially a ThunderClan medicine cat apprentice!

Cragpaw turned to inspect the clearing, where cats mingled about as others left to go on patrol. His father had already returned to his duties, taking on his new deputyship with pride. Cragpaw sighed, eyelids drooping as he trailed Larkbite's figure as the dark tom left the camp with a small patrol at his tail.

"Come on, Cragpaw." Nightpaw flicked his tail over Cragpaw's ear.

The dark gray tom turned to see Nightpaw slinking off towards the medicine den. Cragpaw's heart sped up. "Right!" He purred.

He raced ahead of Nightpaw to catch up with Stumpwhisker. Now that he was finally an apprentice—Stumpwhisker's apprentice, at that—he could actually enter the medicine den!

"Stumpwhisker!" He exclaimed, bursting through the fern tunnel. "What are we doing first?"

His whiskers shivered with excitement as he spotted the medicine cat nosing through the slab of herbs. He collected a pawful of roots and leaves, before piling them into a large oak leaf.

"I'll be checking up on Sedgeflight and her kits," Stumpwhisker replied, scooping the herb bundle into his jaws. Nightpaw poked his head into the den, and quickly withdrew as Stumpwhisker pushed past.

Cragpaw scampered eagerly behind the older tom. "And? What can we do to help?" He pressed, his tail waving high with excitement.

Stumpwhisker heaved a sigh. "You and Nightpaw get settled in my den. Once you're finished, you may ask Goosepaw for help with

utilizing some mousebile."

Cragpaw's eyes gleamed. "Mousebile? What's that?"

Stumpwhisker flicked his tail. "You'll see. For now, you two had best get your nests ready."

Cragpaw trailed to a stop as Stumpwhisker swiped his herb bundle into his jaws and slipped into the nursery.

"He doesn't seem too enthused to have us around," Nightpaw snorted. Cragpaw glanced over to see that the black tom was scowling.

"Maybe he's just grouchy," Cragpaw defended, his fur prickling.

Nightpaw shrugged, and after looking around the clearing, he padded towards a cluster of ferns. The apprentice's den.

Cragpaw sprinted to catch up to his brother. "Why are you going over here?" The tom asked once he'd fallen into pace with his littermate.

Nightpaw twitched his tail. "We need to get nests from somewhere. I'd bet three mousetails that Cricketpaw and Goosepaw prepped some bedding for us."

"I guess that's possible," Cragpaw conceded.

Nightpaw slipped inside, and Cragpaw squirmed in only a heartbeat later. The darkness of the den met him. The air, though musty, had a faint fresh breeze trickling in from the entrance. Cricketpaw jerked her head up and scowled in their direction.

"What are you doing here?" She snapped, her silver eyes narrowed in the darkness. "I'm trying to sleep, y'know."

"We're here to get our nests," Nightpaw replied simply, nosing around on the floor until he found two piles of fresh bedding. He cast a knowing look back at Cragpaw, who smiled eagerly and padded to his side.

Cricketpaw huffed. "Wow, *congratulations*. You found them." She rolled back over and flopped her head into the moss.

Cragpaw grabbed the corners of one nest between his teeth and backed away, dragging it out of the den. He relinquished his hold and glanced around, righting himself, before snagging it once again and hauling it over to the fern tunnel.

He wriggled inside, backwards, and deposited the moss nest in a corner near the entrance, a few tail-lengths away from Stumpwhisker's nest. He sniffed the bedding to double check, and verified this through Stumpwhisker's powerful aroma.

He gently kneaded his moss and fluffed it out, before backing away with a satisfied purr. It looked cozy enough, fluffy and bold around the edges, while kneaded down in the center with just enough space to curl up in. Cragpaw glanced over to Nightpaw, who was just finishing his own nest about a whisker-length away from Cragpaw's.

"Done!" The black tom cheered with a whisk of his tail, flashing his bright yellow eyes to his brother.

Cragpaw smiled. "Shall we find Goosepaw now?"

"Of course." Nightpaw swished his tail and padded outside. Cragpaw followed closely behind, blinking happily in the bright sunlight.

The gray tom's eyes roamed across the clearing, until at last he spotted the dusty tabby. Goosepaw was busy nosing her way through the freshkill pile. She plucked up a rather plump vole and nestled down near a cluster of gorse by the apprentice's den.

Cragpaw and Nightpaw approached the older apprentice, and she looked up with uninterested gray eyes.

"What do you two want?" She asked, taking a large bite out of her vole. Cragpaw's mouth watered at the sight of the juicy prey, but he shook his hunger away.

"Stumpwhisker told us to ask you for help with some mousebile," Cragpaw's eyes glittered with excitement.

Goosepaw raised a brow. "On your first day? How fun."

Nightpaw bobbed his head. "What is it, even?" He flexed his claws and glanced around, his fur ruffled with excitement.

Goosepaw laughed. The two tom's exchanged glances, and then looked at her in confusion.

"What's so funny?" Cragpaw mewed, feeling a self conscious itch beneath his fur.

Goosepaw shook her head vigorously. "Let me finish eating and I'll show you. I'm sure Rattail will be thrilled to see you two."

Cragpaw and Nightpaw sat as they waited. Cragpaw's tail twitched restlessly, but he tried earnestly to hide his impatience. Finally, Goosepaw took one last clean bite of her meal and swiped her tongue daintily across her whiskers, before reluctantly standing to her paws and giving a brisk shake of her fur.

"Follow me," she mewed, and the dusty tabby led the way quickly across the clearing with the two young apprentices bumbling behind her.

Cragpaw ducked beneath the hanging ferns as he slipped back into the medicine den. Goosepaw strode to the dark corners of the den, collected a small wad of moss, and brought it back to Cragpaw and Nightpaw. She dropped the moss to the floor and with her claws, she tore it into two smaller pieces.

"This one is for you," she passed one to Cragpaw, who gave it a sniff, "and this one is for you." She tossed the last one to Nightpaw.

Cragpaw's nose wrinkled. The moss smelt acidic and gross. "What is it?" He asked.

"Mousebile," Goosepaw said with a swish of her tail. "It's literally just bile from a mouse's stomach. It's used to remove ticks."

Cragpaw frowned. "Ticks?"

"Yes, it would appear that Stumpwhisker would like you to clean

Rattail's ticks today. Dab it lightly on any you find, and let them fall off. Don't rip them off or their heads will stick."

Nightpaw groaned. "Are you kidding me? On our first day, *this* is what we're assigned?"

Goosepaw shrugged. "That's what it looks like. Anyways, I'm off to sleep now. Viperwing wants to take me out later tonight to go hunting. Have fun, you two." The dusty she-cat's whiskers trembled in amusement as she gave the two toms a sympathetic stare. With a graceful whisk of her tail, she padded confidently away.

Dejectedly, Cragpaw collected the bundle of smelly moss into his jaws and exited the den with Nightpaw by his side. The two medicine cat apprentices succumbed to their distasteful chore.

Chapter Five

The next morning, Cragpaw woke with a strange feeling of emptiness in his chest. No fur brushed against his, the sweet smell of Strikefeather didn't greet him, and neither did the soft snores of his denmates. His amber eyes blinked aimlessly. Where was he?

Cragpaw glanced around. Stumpwhisker lay curled in his bed a few tail-lengths away, while Nightpaw was dozing in a pile of moss close to Cragpaw's. The emptiness that had clamped its icy claws around his chest slowly stretched open as he realized that no, he wasn't lost. He was still safely tucked away in ThunderClan camp as an apprentice. *Stumpwhisker's* apprentice.

Cragpaw rose to his paws and gently nudged his brother awake. Nightpaw stirred and blearily looked over at Cragpaw.

"What is it?" He grunted, golden eyes slightly unfocused with exhaustion.

"It's time to get up." Cragpaw twitched his whiskers. "I don't want to sleep in today!"

Nightpaw heaved a sigh and hefted himself to his paws. The black tom began grooming moss out of his fur, and Cragpaw replicated his movements until he was happy with how his pelt looked. Nice and clean, with no knots or mats. He licked his paws, which were still bitter from mousebile, and shuddered.

"Do you know how to get this stink out of your paws?" He muttered to Nightpaw.

Nightpaw glanced over and sniffed at Cragpaw's paws. His nose crinkled with distaste. "Honestly, I'm not sure. We should ask Stumpwhisker when he wakes up. For now, neither of us should lick our paws."

Cragpaw nodded and stretched. He glanced back to see that

Nightpaw had returned to working a particularly knotted piece of moss out of his fur. Cragpaw's stomach rumbled loudly, so with a brisk shake of his pelt, the gray tom slipped out of the den and into the clearing.

The slightest sliver of light trickled into camp. A pinkish glow soared across the sky as the sun, out of sight behind the forest canopy, began to rise. Cragpaw's nose guided him to the freshkill pile where some prey leftover from the previous day lay, growing stale and cold.

Cragpaw selected a chaffinch, and padded over to the draping fern near the apprentice's den. He settled down and happily ate his meal, though he wished it were still fresh.

As he chewed on its stringy meat, cats began to slowly rise from their nests and enter the clearing. Those who were prearranged to dawn patrols quietly gathered near the camp entrance, before dispersing through the bramble tunnel.

Larkbite emerged from the warrior's den with his mouth stretched wide in a yawn. His amber eyes flitted about the clearing until he spotted Cragpaw. A small smile lit up the deputy's eyes, and he padded over to his son's side.

"Up early, I see?" He purred, settling down next to Cragpaw.

Cragpaw finished his mouthful of food and nodded happily. "Yup! I wanted to show Stumpwhisker that I can be responsible enough to wake up on time."

"Good for you." Larkbite gently shouldered the younger tom. "I'm sure you'll turn out to be an amazing medicine cat with your brother. You can't begin to imagine how proud I am."

Cragpaw's chest thrummed. "Thanks," he mewed heartily, taking another bite out of the chaffinch.

"Mind if I take a bite?" Larkbite inquired. "I forgot to eat last night."

Cragpaw nudged the chaffinch towards his father. "Go on ahead," he mewed. "It's a bit cold, but it still tastes alright."

Larkbite knelt down and happily tore off a chunk of flesh. "Soon, we won't be having leftovers like this any more. You'll be grateful for the stale prey once leaf-bare comes."

"Is leaf-bare really that bad?" Cragpaw asked.

Larkbite nodded as he ripped off one more piece of meat, whisking his tongue across his whiskers. "Leaf-bare is always a nasty season. I can't remember a time where there *wasn't* a shortage of prey once the snow came."

Cragpaw hummed in acknowledgement. He'd only heard tales of leaf-bare from the nursery queens and Rattail. He'd been born in the end of the bitter season, barely experiencing the cold weather until green-leaf had arrived and quickly swept it off its feet.

"Well, duty calls." Larkbite eyed up the Highrock, where Ripestar's den lay nestled within. The orange-furred leader was emerging from behind the screen of lichen with a yawn. "Thanks for sharing, and have a nice day. Tell Nightpaw I said hi." Larkbite gave Cragpaw an affectionate lick between the ears before quickly padding away.

A few heartbeats later, Nightpaw came running over with a small mouse dangling from his jaws.

"You just missed it!" Cragpaw teased as he finished his chaffinch, butting his brother on the shoulder. "Larkbite just shared some food with me."

"Mouse-dung, really?" Nightpaw's tail drooped, and he wistfully cast a glance to their father, who was speaking softly to Ripestar. "Maybe he'll eat with me tomorrow."

"I'm sure he'll be happy to," Cragpaw reassured.

Nightpaw shrugged and devoured his mouse. Once he was finished, the brothers chatted for a bit and returned to the medicine den. Stumpwhisker was awake now and was daintily grooming himself.

"Good morning," Cragpaw mewed to the older tom with a smile.

Stumpwhisker glanced up, licking a paw and drawing it over his

face. "Good morning, you two. I see you made sure to wake up early."

Cragpaw nodded eagerly. "We did!"

Nightpaw smiled, then quickly added, "How do you wash mousebile off? It tastes *horrible*!"

Stumpwhisker chortled and stopped his grooming. He flicked his tail, beckoning the apprentices over to his side. "You see this stream?" He meowed, indicating to a little rivulet of water that snaked down from the wall and along a crack on the floor.

The two toms bobbed their heads.

"Dip your paws in it and rinse well. That should wash away the bile."

Cragpaw padded forward and did as Stumpwhisker instructed. He slipped his forepaws into the cold stream of water, and he shivered at the biting cold. He rubbed his paws together until he felt as though they were thoroughly rinsed. He pulled them away and gave his forepaw a brisk lick.

Though it wasn't gone completely, the tang of bile was very faint. "Thanks, Stumpwhisker!" He purred in relief.

Stumpwhisker inclined his head in response as the two apprentices finished cleaning up.

"Now, we'll be going to explore the territory today," the mottled tom explained. "You two have eaten, I hope?"

Nightpaw and Cragpaw nodded.

"Good, then let's go."

Stumpwhisker exited the medicine den with ease, and the two young toms scampered eagerly after him. The sun was now drifting brightly through the sky, and its powerful light dappled the forest floor as it sifted through the leaves. Cragpaw shot a glance towards the nursery. Hollykit was watching the two with a tilt of her head,

but her attention was swiftly claimed as Cardinalkit tackled her.

Behind the two tussling kits, Fleckkit was playing carefully with Sedgeflight's litter, darting his ginger tail across the ground as the tiny army of she-kits pursued it with delighted squeals. Cragpaw smiled, then diverted his attention. He hurried to keep up with his mentor and brother.

The trio of cats reached the bramble tunnel. Stumpwhisker expertly squeezed through, and Cragpaw followed eagerly behind Nightpaw. His gray fur got caught in the brambles in a few spots, and he growled out of frustration when he had to yank it out. He scrabbled up ledges, stones catching in the pads of his paw as he sent them tumbling back down into the camp ravine.

He reached the top, moments after Nightpaw, and his breath slipped from his lungs.

"Woah," Cragpaw gasped.

The forest swelled around them. Plants were scattered everywhere on the forest floor. Trees expanded high into the sky, their incredible trunks dividing into millions of branches and leaves. Through the leaves, Cragpaw could catch the barest glimpse of blue skies, golden sunlight passing through them and igniting the forest floor in bright greens and yellows.

Nightpaw's expression mirrored Cragpaw's awe. Stumpwhisker's amused purr caught the gray tom's attention.

"That's enough gawking," the medicine cat rumbled, flicking his tail over the littermates' ears. "If we want to finish exploring the territory by nightfall, we'd best get moving."

"Yes, Stumpwhisker!" Nightpaw chirped.

Cragpaw blinked slowly, still entranced by the new sights and smells before him. He spun around with a soft *mrrow* as a brisk wind sent a leaf skittering down from above. He lashed his tail and leaped, hooking the slightly yellowed leaf with a claw and landing softly on the leaflitter.

He turned around to see that Stumpwhisker and Nightpaw had already hurried away. His heart panged, and with a light surge of panic, he quickly traced their smells. He caught up with them moments later. It didn't seem as though either had missed his presence.

"Over here," Stumpwhisker called back, darting forward to a cluster of golden-petaled flowers blooming at the edges of a bubbling stream.

Cragpaw trotted over with curiosity swelling in his paws.

"What is it?" Nightpaw queried.

"This is marigold." Stumpwhisker tenderly hooked a claw around a petal. "Can you guess what it's used for?"

"Scratches?" Cragpaw suggested eagerly, leaning forward to sniff at the little flower. It was surprisingly pungent for such a small, delicate plant. His nose crinkled and he pulled away.

"Roughly, yes." Stumpwhisker nodded his head in approval with a glance at Cragpaw. "How exactly do you think it's used?"

"Um..."

"You chew it up!" Nightpaw offered.

"Yes! Though, you don't swallow it. You chew either the leaves or petals into a poultice, which you spit on your pad and rub it into a wound. Like this," Stumpwhisker gently nipped off a tiny petal and chewed on it. He tilted his forepaw and spat the now sticky juices onto his pad. He showed it to the two apprentices. "Cragpaw, show me your paw."

Blinking in confusion, Cragpaw lifted his right paw.

"No, the other one."

Cragpaw replaced it with his left paw. He blinked. A small, bloody furrow snaked along his paw pads.

"You scratched yourself on the rocks when leaving camp. I could smell the blood for a decent bit now. No matter what, you must *never* waste herbs. They're a precious resource that could save the lives of your Clanmates. Had you not injured yourself, I would have taught you to use this some other time."

Stumpwhisker gave Cragpaw's paw a few quick licks to clean the wound. Then, he gently kneaded the poultice into the scratch. Cragpaw winced at the sting, and resisted the urge to pull away.

"I know that we apply marigold to scratches," Nightpaw mewed cautiously, "but what exactly does it do?"

"Excellent question!" Stumpwhisker purred. "First, go fetch a small wad of cobwebs for your brother. We don't want him getting any dirt in his wound. You should be able to find some between the roots of an oak or beneath some brush."

Nightpaw scampered away and returned a few heartbeats later with cobwebs strapped around his paw. "Here!" He chirped.

Stumpwhisker thanked the young apprentice and scooped the webs into his paw. He then gently applied them to Cragpaw's paw.

"There we go."

Cragpaw twisted his paw around, curiosity shining in his eyes as he studied the cobwebs. He looked up as Stumpwhisker proceeded, "Marigold is an excellent herb to use when trying to prevent infection. It's also effective at quickening the process of healing." He paused. "You'll need to change the cobwebs later and apply a cleaner poultice."

Cragpaw nodded slowly, tenderly placing his paw on the ground. It didn't hurt, but it felt strange to have his paw strapped beneath a layer of protection.

"Now that that's settled," Stumpwhisker swished his tail, "let's continue on."

Cragpaw and Nightpaw followed after the medicine cat as he pushed through the forest. A pair of butterflies fluttered past, and

the mouth-watering scent of a mouse touched Cragpaw's scent glands. "Will we ever go hunting?" He inquired, intently watching as the little rodent scurried past.

"Hunting isn't one of our duties. We leave that to the warriors." Stumpwhisker leaped gracefully over a fallen tree. The apprentices scrambled after him.

On the other side of the trunk, Stumpwhisker burrowed through the loose earth beneath a small gap under the trunk. Cragpaw pricked his ears as the mottled tom pulled back with little stems clenched between his teeth.

"What are those?" Nightpaw asked, leaning a whisker-length away from Stumpwhisker's muzzle to give the herbs a tentative sniff.

"Thyme," Stumpwhisker mewed. "We use it to ease a cat when they're in shock."

Cragpaw tilted his head. "How do you know when a cat is in shock?"

"The greatest sign is when a cat cannot think clearly after a traumatic injury or event. If they're acting fine, when clearly they *aren't* fine, they may be going into shock. Physically, you need to search for uncontrollable shaking or breathlessness. If you look at their pupils, you will find them to be dilated in a majority of cases."

Cragpaw nodded slowly. Stumpwhisker plucked an oak leaf from a young tree, curling it around the cluster of stems to create a small bundle. As they continued through the trees, the ground trembled beneath his paws, and he dropped to a nervous crouch.

"What's that?" He whispered, his eyes darting around.

"It's the thunderpath. We'll be there soon."

Swallowing his anxiety, Cragpaw followed tentatively. He ducked beneath a low branch, and a fern flapped into his face, blocking his path. He shoved it aside with his nose and hurried to catch up. His eyes widened and his pace slowed at the sight of the black, stony sheet stretching as far as the forest on the other side.

The ground trembled, and a slow roar lifted through the air as little stones rattled against the earth. Nervously, Cragpaw stretched a paw towards the smooth stone surface, his ears pricked as he glanced both ways. A red figure was rapidly growing closer.

"Back up!" Stumpwhisker lurched forward, sinking his teeth fiercely into Cragpaw's scruff. Cragpaw yelped as the tom yanked him back —mere moments before the red figure thundered past on rolling black paws.

Cragpaw gaped in surprise. "What was *that?"*

Stumpwhisker flung him to the ground in a patch of nettles, and the gray tom scrambled back to his paws against the sting as his mentor's fury rose. "That was a *monster,*" Stumpwhisker hissed, "and you nearly became crowfood!"

Cragpaw blinked, glancing past the tom's shoulders and to the thunderpath beyond. "Crowfood?" He squeaked.

"Crowfood," the tom snarled.

Nightpaw brushed up next to Cragpaw, giving his brother a gentle nudge. "You need to be more careful. That monster almost caught you," he mumbled.

Cragpaw blinked uncomfortably, glancing back and forth to the dark path. Did he really just make a close call with death? He shook out his fur to settle his nerves. "What's on the other side?" He asked instead, his voice still a pitch higher than usual.

Stumpwhisker's twisted whiskers trembled and he heaved a rattly sigh. "That's ShadowClan territory. We don't go there if we want to keep the fur on our pelts."

"Aren't we medicine cats, though?" Nightpaw mewed. "I thought the warrior code was different for us."

"That's true, but it doesn't mean the other Clans would like us on their hunting grounds. We are still expected to respect their boundaries."

Nightpaw twitched his ears and offered no further comment.

"Let's keep moving, I suppose. And no more stepping onto thunderpaths," Stumpwhisker's eyes narrowed to slits as he turned to look at Cragpaw, who recoiled slightly beneath the tom's smoldering golden glare.

The three pushed on until the sun was nearly setting. Orange glows sifted through the leaves, leaving beautiful rays of sunlight to dapple their fur. The sound of bubbling water merrily greeted Cragpaw's ears. Excitement tingled in his paws as the cats emerged onto a riverbank. Clear water swept past, weaving betweens stones and boulders. Ahead was a stack of rocks, smooth at the top with just enough space in the canopy above for the sun to touch it at all times of day. A slight heat haze hovered above the rocks, blurring the trees beyond.

"Is that Sunningrocks?" Cragpaw gasped, eagerly shifting his weight. Larkbite had always told him and Nightpaw tales of the ferocious battles for that particular scrap of land—*it's on our side of the river, so I don't see why RiverClan throws such a fuss!*

Stumpwhisker slipped forward, testing the air carefully. "Yes, that's Sunningrocks."

"It's ours, right?" Nightpaw mewed.

"For now it is." Stumpwhisker narrowed his eyes and peered across the river. "Greetings, Minnowsong."

Cragpaw blinked as a sleek white she-cat slipped out from the reeds on the other side of the riverbank. Orange spots dappled across her fur, freckling her muzzle and stretching to wrap around her eyes. She blinked fondly across the water.

"Good evening, Stumpwhisker. Taking some apprentices to collect herbs, I see?"

Stumpwhisker let out an uncharacteristic purr. Cragpaw glanced at him in astonishment.

"Not just any apprentices. Cragpaw, Nightpaw, meet Minnowsong.

She's RiverClan's medicine cat. Minnowsong, you'll be seeing these two at the half-moon Gathering."

The brothers exchanged glances, and Cragpaw awkwardly hung back as Nightpaw politely dipped his head. "Hi, I'm Nightpaw. The mouse-looking furball next to me is Cragpaw."

Cragpaw bristled. "I don't look like a mouse," he hissed quietly.

Nightpaw shrugged and kept his eyes trained across the river.

"It's lovely to meet you all. Perhaps we'll get to know each other better at the next half-moon Gathering." She paused, turning her attention to Stumpwhisker. "The watermint is growing especially well now, down near the gorge. I hope you don't mind if I grab some from your side of the border."

Stumpwhisker shook his head. "As long as you keep your paws in the water, I could care less."

Minnowsong purred. "Great." She tilted her head upstream and called out, "Nettlepaw! We're heading downriver."

A white she-cat with a ginger tail and spots came running over, her fur fluffed out with excitement. Cragpaw blinked, noticing that the two she-cats looked awfully similar as they padded, side-by-side, down the riverbank.

"Is that her daughter?" Cragpaw asked brightly.

Stumpwhisker shook his head. "No, Nettlepaw is the daughter of Minnowsong's sister. Medicine cats can't have kits." Nightpaw whirled his head around, blinking rapidly. Stumpwhisker regarded the dark apprentice for a moment. "I'll have to teach you about the medicine cat code tomorrow."

Cragpaw nodded in agreement. The more he knew about being a medicine cat, the better.

Stumpwhisker breathed a sigh. "Well, it'll be dark soon, so let's head back to camp. You two have had enough excitement for today."

Together, the three cats began the long trek back to camp. Cragpaw cast his eyes back to the river, excitement fizzing in his paws as he wondered about the coming half-moon Gathering. Perhaps the other medicine cats could teach him some tricks that Stumpwhisker could not.

Chapter Six

Cragpaw pushed numbly through the fern tunnel and stumbled into the clearing. He blinked blearily, watching as Larkbite organized early patrols.

His legs throbbed with soreness, and his dressed paw felt cold. He sat down near a patch of bracken and gently unwound the cobwebs. This was his second time taking a look at the wound. His foot was strange and slimy from the overnight dressing, but the small wound had scabbed over already and was barely noticeable. He tossed the cobwebs to the side and lapped the marigold poultice away, satisfied now that his foot could finally breathe. He placed his paw on the ground and smiled as Strikefeather made her way over.

"How was your first day?" She asked, settling down beside him.

Cragpaw leaned over and happily nuzzled her chin. "It was great," he purred. "I saw the thunderpath and met Minnowsong, and Stumpwhisker taught us some herbs." He parted his mouth, eager to explain what he learned, but the names swam away like trying to catch fog. "I forget what they were called, though."

Strikefeather smiled, brushing her feathery tail along the young tom's back. "I'm so glad you had a good time. And you're positive that being a medicine cat is what you want?"

Cragpaw nodded. "Of course! It's really fun, and makes fighting seem like kit's play." He paused for a moment, brightening with excitement. "Do you know when the half-moon is?"

"It's only a few sunrises away. Excited to meet the other medicine cats, I presume?"

Cragpaw bobbed his head eagerly. He flicked his ear as Nightpaw sleepily padded out of the medicine den and made his way over to join them.

He flopped against Cragpaw's side with a groan. "Great StarClan, my paws feel like they're falling off!"

Cragpaw nodded in quiet agreement and gently nudged his brother away, while Strikefeather purred her amusement. "Of course your paws are sore. You've never traveled so far before." She leaned across Cragpaw and gave Nightpaw's ear a gentle lick. "Eventually, trekking the territory will be as easy as washing your fur. Now, how about I get you two something to eat? Does a squirrel sound fine?"

Cragpaw beamed. "Yes, please!" He purred.

Strikefeather strolled away with her tail high above her spine. She returned only moments later with a gray squirrel dragging between her paws. She dropped the fresh-kill before the two toms, and they gorged themselves like they hadn't seen food for moons. All the while, a purr thrummed in her chest.

Cragpaw blinked up at his mother once he was finished, sloppily rasping his tongue across his whiskers. "Sorry, Strikefeather," he mewed meekly. "Did you want some?"

"No, I'm fine," Strikefeather laughed. "I thought you must be hungry after working yourself so hard yesterday. Larkbite promised to share something with me at sun-high, anyways." Her golden eyes glowed softly as she looked over at the camp entrance. Cragpaw followed her gaze, but his father was no longer in sight.

"Do you think he'll bring anything for Nightpaw and I?" Cragpaw proposed hopefully.

Strikefeather smiled in amusement. "Likely not, seeing how you already ate a whole squirrel. Perhaps if you ask him though, he can catch something for the two of you some other time."

Cragpaw nodded in contemplation. It was a nice idea, but knowing how busy Larkbite always was... it was very unlikely.

"Cragpaw, Nightpaw," Stumpwhisker pushed out of the medicine den, glancing between the two apprentices. "Clean up that squirrel and meet me outside the camp. It's time for you to learn the

medicine cat code."

Strikefeather gave her sons both a lick on the cheek as their mentor padded away. "Run along," she mewed. "I'll clean up your mess, but only if you promise to tell me all about your day today."

Nightpaw sniffed. "Thanks, Strikefeather."

She watched proudly as the toms hurried off to the camp entrance. Cragpaw waved his tail in farewell as he shoved his way through the prickly brambles. He struggled to clamber up the slabs of rocks, gasping for breath once he reached the top.

Nightpaw shoved him to the side with an annoyed grunt. "Move it, mouse-face—I'd like some solid ground under my paws, too!"

Cragpaw curled his lip for a retort, but thought better of it, and instead mumbled an apology. Stumpwhisker watched the two from only a few tail-lengths away, his eyes sharp.

"Come along," he mewed, pushing off in the opposite direction they'd gone yesterday. Unwillingly, Cragpaw followed, already dreading how much sorer his paws would be.

Soon, the familiar deciduous trees and dense undergrowth blended into pines, their tall trunks stretching far into the sky and the scent of their particularly sweet sap soaking the air. The ground was barren aside from thorn-covered vines and little shrubs, the edges of their leaves painted red. He leaned forward to sniff one, but Stumpwhisker batted his muzzle away.

"Don't," he growled. "That's poison ivy. Touch it, and you'll be scratching yourself raw for days."

Cragpaw winced and backed away. His paws were reluctant as they pushed further into the woods. He carefully maneuvered away from any more poison ivy. Nightpaw walked with his tail high above his spine, nose tipped curiously to the air as he drank in all of the new smells.

"This is Tall Pines," Stumpwhisker explained, pulling to a stop. He looked at the two apprentices, sitting down and curling his tail over

his paws. "The twolegplace is not far, and we can find catmint in their gardens. Do you know what catmint is used for?"

Cragpaw, carefully eyeing the ground beneath him, lowered his rump. He shook his head.

"Isn't it used to cure greencough?" Nightpaw proposed, his pelt brushing against Cragpaw's.

Stumpwhisker nodded. "That is correct. It's difficult to find, especially when kittypets have a tendency to eat it. Every cat knows what it is, in case they can find any while patrolling."

Nightpaw beamed, and Cragpaw mentally clawed himself. *Of course that's what it is. Strikefeather taught us all about it when we were kits!* He twitched his tail unhappily.

"Anyways, that's not what we're out here for. I'm here to explain to you the medicine cat code," Stumpwhisker meowed, glancing between the two apprentices.

Cragpaw sat taller in his eagerness, pricking his ears. Nightpaw, on the other paw, scuffed uncomfortably at the ground.

"You may *not* share the messages you receive from StarClan with anybody but your leader or fellow medicine cats. Your bond with your ancestors is sacred, and doing so would only infringe on it," Stumpwhisker paused to allow the apprentices to take it in, and Cragpaw felt excitement flood through him. His brother was a medicine cat, so it was a relief to know that he wouldn't have to hide anything from him. "A medicine cat only shares dreams with StarClan. Watch for stars in the sky and in your ancestor's fur. If they are missing, you must wake immediately."

Cragpaw shivered at the thought. "Does that mean there are other spirits out there?" He breathed.

Stumpwhisker nodded grimly. "There are, and you must tread carefully when you share tongues with StarClan. It can be dangerous." He flicked his tail and continued, "You may only retire if there is another cat ready to take your place. In the case of you

two, I would suggest training an apprentice together when you're ready to retire, unless one of you desires to perform your duties longer than the other." He cleared his throat, and fixed his steady gaze on Nightpaw. "Lastly, a medicine cat may not fall in love, take a mate, or have kits. Upon treading the sacred path of a medicine cat, you are sacrificing romance in a show of love to your Clan. Do you understand?"

Nightpaw swallowed uneasily, but gave a short nod.

"I understand," mewed Cragpaw.

"Well, that's our code. Simple and to the point." Stumpwhisker sighed and rose to his paws, wincing. He flicked out his legs to shake out their soreness.

Nightpaw's eyes narrowed to slits. "Isn't there an herb we can lie in your nest to help your sore joints?"

The mottled tom huffed a laugh. "There is. Who told you about that?"

"You put some in Strikefeather's nest last moon when she was really sore," Nightpaw mewed proudly.

Stumpwhisker nodded with approval. "Good eye. That was ragwort." He paused, and contemplatively sniffed at the wind as it whisked through his fur. "Let's keep moving. Since we're already here, I'll show you the best places for catmint."

Cragpaw grinned as Stumpwhisker padded through the trees, weaving between the tall trunks until they came across a field. The grass was thin. Never before had Cragpaw seen grass so green and short and finely trimmed, and it made him uneasy. On the other side of the grass, a broad wooden fence stretched as far as the eye could see. Cragpaw tested the air. Strange scents flooded into his lungs. They tasted unnatural. He glanced uncomfortably at Stumpwhisker, who was silently watching him and Nightpaw's reactions. His brother showed just as much discomfort, crouched low and ears sharp.

"Up ahead is the twolegplace. You must tread carefully around here, as twolegs like to take their dogs outside the fence. Come," Stumpwhisker bounded easily across the stretch of finely-trimmed grass.

Exchanging a nervous glance with Nightpaw, Cragpaw sprang out of the woods. His fur prickled uneasily as he raced across the stretch of springy ground, until he finally reached Stumpwhisker's side. Nightpaw pulled to a stop with a lash of his tail, and he glanced back to whence they came.

"Climb up onto the wall. Be sure to dig your claws in to support your weight." Stumpwhisker gathered his haunches beneath himself and sprang up. His front paws hooked over the wood, while his hind claws dug into the planks. It wobbled under his weight. He hauled himself up, perching on the precarious wooden fence as he stared down at the apprentices. "Come on, now."

Nightpaw scrambled easily to the top, a proud purr rising to his throat as he settled next to Stumpwhisker, his tail swaying over the edge of the wooden planks. He twisted his neck around to stare down at his brother. "Are you coming or what?" Nightpaw teased.

Cragpaw hesitated, his ears panning out. He cast an uncertain glance back towards the tempting confines of the forest behind him. *But I can't leave,* he scolded himself. *Nightpaw will just call me a mouse!*

Bringing his eyes back to the fence, he gathered his haunches and launched himself at the wood. His front claws clung deep into the soft bark, and his arms trembled with effort. He squeaked in surprise—he'd only made it halfway up! Now fuelled by the fear of falling, he scrabbled frantically the rest of the way up, pulling himself atop the wood with a gasp of relief. He clung to the top for a few moments to stabilize his breathing, slowly turning an anxious eye back to the ground below. He wrapped his tail tightly around his flank.

Stumpwhisker stared for a moment, then turned around and began padding along the narrow fencetop with the ease of practice. Cragpaw swallowed his nerves and followed carefully, watching his

paws as he placed them, one at a time, in front of each other.

On the other side of the fence stood strange, tall structures. They were colored with a mixture of whites and reds, stone and wood and various other substances marring their surfaces. They were squarish and large, with sharp, pointy roofs and the occasional rectangular gap opening to an even stranger interior. In some gardens, Cragpaw even spotted twolegs minding their own business. Some tended their plants, a few yapped at their dogs, and others simply sat beneath the shade—with a peculiar few absorbing the sunlight, much like a lizard on a rock. He jolted as Stumpwhisker pulled to a stop.

Cragpaw peered past the older tom, but couldn't see anything up ahead. He blinked. "Why'd we stop?" He mewed.

Stumpwhisker huffed and flicked his tail to the garden below. Cragpaw looked. Little bushes with tall purple flowers lined the bottom of the fence. "Is that catmint?" He asked.

Stumpwhisker nodded. "That's right."

Nightpaw leaned his front over the edge of the fence and dropped to the garden below. Cragpaw jerked his head to Stumpwhisker, but the older cat simply bore a soft smile as he followed the black apprentice. Cragpaw flattened his ears, and with an anxious twitch of his tail, he joined them.

Stumpwhisker leaned forward and gently nipped off a few shoots of the flowering shrub. Cragpaw mindlessly began digging at its base. Stumpwhisker snorted, cuffing the apprentice over the ears. Cragpaw looked over, blinking in confusion.

"Don't dig up the entire plant, you mouse-brain," he growled. "We don't want to kill it, we want it to regrow."

Heat rushed to Cragpaw's ears, and he shamefully ducked his head. "Sorry," he mumbled, turning his attention to watch exactly how Stumpwhisker did it.

Carefully replicating the medicine cat's moves, he stretched his neck

forward and nipped at the bottom of one of the stalks. The bits of catmint tumbled to the ground, and he scooped them together with a paw. He looked over at his companions, who were also finished collecting their catmint.

Stumpwhisker glanced behind them, his eyes narrowed to slits. "Gather your catmint and hurry to the other side of the fence," he growled.

Cragpaw didn't waste a second in snatching up his stems. As a grinding noise sounded from the twoleg nest behind them, he scrambled up the fence and earnestly dropped to the other side, just in time for a twoleg to angrily shout from the garden.

Nightpaw's eyes gleamed as he joined Cragpaw, and the brothers raced across the springy green grass and back into the treeline. Cragpaw paused, glancing back at the fence. Moments later, Stumpwhisker landed roughly on the ground and hurried to join the apprentices. Assessing the two toms, he grunted his approval. Excitement flooded into Cragpaw's racing heart.

Flicking his tail, Stumpwhisker plunged into the woods, and Cragpaw happily chased after him.

Chapter Seven

Nightpaw passed Cragpaw a bit of tansy, and gently, he nursed it into Grassystep's black-stained mouth. The she-cat reluctantly chewed and swallowed the leaf. He backed away quickly, watching as Nightpaw nudged a soaked wad of moss to the warrior.

Grassystep exploded into a fit of coughing, black spittle flying onto the floor before her. Cragpaw winced and backed away. He kept a wary distance from the diseased she-cat.

"Do you think Stumpwhisker will be back soon?" He murmured, his tail twitching anxiously behind him.

Nightpaw shrugged, dipping a new wad of moss into the little rivulet of water. "Maybe. Who knows where he's off to now?"

Cragpaw hummed his agreement, kneading his paws anxiously into the ground. Grassystep had arrived in the medicine den earlier that day, coughing up black ooze and requesting to see Stumpwhisker. The medicine cat, however, was out on a solo herb-collecting expedition. Their stores had run low, and he aimed to restock them in a day, if he could.

Neither Cragpaw nor Nightpaw knew how to care for the ill warrior. Stumpwhisker never mentioned a black-coughing disease to them, though it vaguely reminded Cragpaw of the age-old disease, red-cough, that he'd shared. The problem was that Grassystep wasn't coughing *blood.* In fact, he had no idea *what* she was coughing up.

The apprentices had mutually decided on feeding her small dosages of tansy. It was used to ease coughs, and yet, it seemed to be doing nothing for the gray warrior. Frankly, it made Cragpaw nervous. Nervous, and very, very afraid.

Relief flushed over him as the soft fragrances of herbs strengthened, and through the fern tunnel emerged Stumpwhisker, plants sticking

out from his pelt and a considerably large bundle dangling from his jaws. His golden eyes flashed over to the apprentices' patient, and he dropped the parcel of plants to the floor.

"Back off, kits," he growled, hurrying forward and nudging the two toms away. "She's sick."

Cragpaw blinked. "We know that," he protested, while his brother added, "We've been giving her tansy to ease her coughing."

Stumpwhisker shook his head idly. He gently urged Grassystep to her paws. "Come over this way, Grassystep," he murmured, pushing aside a curtain of bracken and leading her through the previously hidden crack.

Nightpaw and Cragpaw exchanged glances, and the two of them followed at a careful distance. Cragpaw peeked down the corridor. Ferns draped across a crack overhead, letting in a faint, green-tinted golden glow as sunlight struggled to peek through. He breathed in the musty scent of the small, sheltered ravine. A sour odor overwhelmed the air, very similar to the smell on Grassystep's breath. Cragpaw was surprised to see nests lined about the walls, and to his growing astonishment, he spotted Ivystorm occupying one of them. The tom appeared fragile and weak, dark spittle decorating the area around his nest. His body shuddered as he sucked in a rapid, shaky breath of air.

I haven't seen him for weeks, the apprentice realized with a start. *Is this where he's been?* His eyes drew back to Stumpwhisker, still unaware of the prying eyes that had followed him.

Stumpwhisker guided Grassystep into a different nest, and the tom gently pressed his nose to her head. Grief glittered in his eyes.

Cragpaw urgently nudged his brother back into the main area of the medicine den before Stumpwhisker could see them looking. "Go back!" He hissed.

The two toms scrambled to the herb store, and Nightpaw quickly busied himself with the new bundle of herbs the medicine cat had brought in. Cragpaw, on the other paw, numbly nosed his way

through the shelves to fetch anything that had gone bad, before realizing that he'd made a mess of the previously well-organized shelf in his frenzy. His paws began to work on their own, leaving his thoughts to whirl in astonishment as he wondered about the mysterious new room. Especially the sadness he'd seen in Stumpwhisker's eyes.

Stumpwhisker returned only a few minutes later, glancing at the two apprentices as they busied about. He padded to them and leaned over Cragpaw's shoulder. "Don't put the feverfew with the daisies," he barked.

Stiffening in surprise, Cragpaw nodded and quickly separated the slightly unique white flowers into their designated areas on the shelf. Stumpwhisker grunted in satisfaction, then turned to Nightpaw.

"Good job on feeding her tansy," he said softly. "It helps to slow the spread of the sickness and eases some of the coughing, but it won't stop it completely."

Nightpaw tilted his head. "What *can* stop it?" He asked.

Stumpwhisker exhaled slowly, "That's something I'm still working on."

Cragpaw flicked an ear, an ache growing in his chest. "Is this what Quaildapple died to?" He queried.

Stumpwhisker didn't reply, and instead began to work alongside the apprentices. Cragpaw's stomach churned, but he didn't press the issue. Instead, he focused on sorting the herbs properly and removing the ones that had lost their scent.

❀

"Travel safely, and make sure to watch for thorns," Strikefeather mewed sternly.

Early sunlight glowed behind her ears as she leaned forward to touch her nose to both her kits. Larkbite stood beside her, nodding his agreement at every word she said.

"And don't forget to look out for each other," he added firmly. "It's dangerous out there."

Cragpaw shook out his pelt. "We'll be fine, mother, father. Nobody's allowed to stop us from getting to the Moonstone."

His parents exchanged uneasy glances. "That's usually the case," Larkbite murmured, "but tensions have been high with WindClan in recent moons. Just promise me that if anybody threatens you, you'll turn back."

Reluctance bubbled at his belly, but Cragpaw nodded for their peace of mind. "I promise."

His brother kept quiet, irritation glittering in his golden eyes. He perked up at the sound of Stumpwhisker as the older tom padded over.

"Are the two of you ready?" He asked, glancing between the apprentices.

Cragpaw nodded, hardly able to contain his excitement.

"Then let's go." The tom dipped his head to the apprentices' parents, and he led them across the clearing and out of the camp.

Cragpaw eagerly clambered up the rock tumble, shaking grit out of his pelt as he reached the top. The climb had grown much easier since the first day he'd made it, though his muscles still twinged slightly. With time, he knew, it would be as easy as eating a mouse. The three cats began picking their way through the woods until at last, four massive oaks arced to the air before them. Cragpaw's eyes widened in awe.

"Is this Fourtrees?" He breathed.

Stumpwhisker nodded, a slight smirk quirking his lips as he pushed through the sun-dappled clearing. A massive stone stood in the center of the Gathering-place. Cragpaw knew from nursery tales that the rock was where the four great leaders would stand on the night of the full moon.

His mouth watered at the scent of a mouse, and he turned curiously towards the source of it. His eyes widened as he spotted the little, dusty-brown critter rooting through the leaf-litter.

"Can we eat?" He asked eagerly.

Nightpaw rolled his eyes, and Stumpwhisker shook his head. "You mustn't eat before you share tongues with StarClan," he chastised lightly. "It's disrespectful."

Cragpaw's stomach growled its protest, but he nodded in acceptance of the old tom's words. He'd only been a medicine cat *apprentice* for a few days—Stumpwhisker had been a full medicine cat for seasons. There was no point to argue.

They padded across the clearing and pushed through some gorse to the other side. Cragpaw emerged, his fur buffeted by wind and his eyes widening at the endless stretch of golden grass. Some of the tall stalks to the side rustled, and a dark brown she-cat emerged from the fronds, a pale ginger tom at her side.

"Morningshine, Waspfur," Stumpwhisker greeted the two with a dip of his head.

The she-cat smiled. "Finally got yourself an apprentice, I see?"

"Oh, Morningshine, there are two!" The tom exclaimed. He glanced eagerly between the two apprentices. "Hello there."

Cragpaw shyly dipped his head, and Nightpaw eagerly introduced himself, "I'm Nightpaw, and the mouse over there is Cragpaw." His grin broadened at Cragpaw's scowl.

Morningshine chuckled softly, surveying the dark gray tom. "I don't see any mice here. Are you Larkbite's son?"

Cragpaw nodded.

She smiled. "That's no surprise, you look just like him."

"I do?"

The she-cat nodded. "Handsome and young, just like him."

Nightpaw bristled. "What about me? I'm his son, too!"

Morningshine laughed, "Of course you are."

Her ears pricked and her attention shifted. Cragpaw followed her gaze to see Minnowsong emerging from the underbrush near Fourtrees, Nettlepaw eagerly prancing alongside her.

"Is this everybody?" The elegant she-cat purred, glancing between the gathered medicine cats.

"All except WindClan," Waspfur said.

Minnowsong smiled. "We should get moving if we want to be there by moonhigh, then." Her eyes flashed to the horizon. The sun was growing ever closer to the horizon, deepening the shadows and glowing brightly on the golden grass.

Cragpaw happily fell into step with Nettlepaw as the group of cats began the long trek through the moor. The wind was strong outside of the safety of the trees. He felt unpleasantly exposed under the vast, empty sky. A hawk screeched far off. A chill ran down his spine, and he lowered his belly close to the earth.

"You're fine," Nightpaw whispered. "It's far away."

Cragpaw gratefully nodded at his brother, but he kept himself low. Just in case.

Cragpaw caught the faint scent of cat as they continued, and slowly, he rose to his full height to peer over the rippling lake of golden grass. Sunset had befallen the land, and the dissipating glow pierced his eyes as the sun slid beneath the horizon. The sky shifted from gold, to orange, to dappled with soft pinks as distant clouds emerged from beyond the skyline.

The cats padded past a strange twoleg structure as the land fell into darkness. The scent of mice and hares grew strong, and his nose twitched hungrily. He ignored his famishment and pushed on. The smell of the cat they'd been trailing grew stronger, and gradually, so

did the putrid stench of a thunderpath. His ears strained as the distant roar of a monster cut the air, and he glanced at the other medicine cats. They appeared perfectly calm.

They emerged onto a small stretch of short grass. Ahead, the hardened black thunderpath stood before them. Beyond were even more fields, and beyond those, a stony peak.

He gaped. "Is that Highstones?"

Minnowsong smiled at the apprentice and nodded. "We have to cross the thunderpath to get there."

He swallowed nervously. Tentatively following the other medicine cats, they slipped across the field and stopped at the edge of the path. Cragpaw pressed himself close to the earth as the ground trembled, and a glaring pair of lights thundered closer. The monster roared as it blasted past, pelting grit at the cluster of felines.

"Go when I tell you to," Stumpwhisker commanded, crouched at the edge of the path.

Terror clutched at Cragpaw's stomach as another monster thundered along. Then another. And another. Stumpwhisker's ears were pointed sharply ahead, and his eyes flicked left, then right.

"Go, now!" The older tom yowled.

The cats streaked onto the thunderpath, racing alongside one another as together, they bolted to the other side. Cragpaw stared after them. His paws remained frozen to the grass.

"Cragpaw! What are you doing?" Nightpaw called from the other side.

A monster whizzed past. The awful fumes jolted him out of his frozen state. He squinted against the hot steam. He glanced to his sides, but nobody was there with him. He shifted nervously from paw to paw. How would he get across now?

"Cragpaw, you have to cross!" Morningshine shouted. "Look both ways. If there are no monsters, run like there's a pack of dogs on

your tail! You have to hurry!"

Cragpaw whimpered slightly, pressing his ears firmly across his skull as two more monsters ran by. Their lights were piercing and their stench was horrid.

He closed his eyes for a heartbeat to steel himself. *I want to be a medicine cat, don't I? I can't do anything if I don't share tongues with StarClan.*

The silence that tightly gripped the air was deafening. After a few heartbeats of struggling to contain his rapid breathing, he glanced left. Then, he glanced right. Gathering his haunches, he pressed his ears flat against his skull and propelled himself onto the path. His belly fur skimmed the ground and he held his tail low as he ran as fast as he could.

A thunderous roar grew in the air. His eyes shot to the side. A blinding pair of eyes rapidly closed in on him. A terrified yowl escaped his throat as the monster bore down on him. It took only a moment to realize that, under his intensifying fright, his paws had stopped moving. He squinted his eyes against the nauseating glow and braced his body for impact.

The monster blared its fury and squealed as its rolling black paws churned, spinning to the side as it struggled to evade the tom. To his rapidly heightening horror, it wasn't turning quickly enough—and he *still* couldn't convince his legs to move.

Teeth fiercely closed around his scruff. A cat yanked him out of the way in the nick of time as the monster whizzed past, swerving across the black asphalt. Wind buffeted his fur and the thick stench of smoke choked him. The cat threw him to the grass. He rolled over to his paws and retched.

Once he had cleared his throat, he turned shakily to the other medicine cats. Most looked worried, Nightpaw looked furious, and Stumpwhisker's twisted whiskers were shaking.

He craned his neck to see Waspfur standing over him, visibly shaken with his fur standing on end. "Th-Thank you," he whispered.

"Cragpaw, you mouse-brain!" Nightpaw yowled. He swatted Cragpaw's cheek, his claws unsheathed. The apprentice flinched at the sting, the taste of blood penetrating his tongue.

Minnowsong raced forward and grabbed Nightpaw by the scruff, pulling him back before he could strike his brother again. "That's enough!" She snapped, throwing the disgruntled tom to the ground. She turned to Cragpaw, her ears flat. "Are you okay?"

Cragpaw froze for a moment. His mind swam slowly. Did anything hurt? After doing a tedious mental check, he nodded, albeit shakily.

"Good." The she-cat briskly nodded her head. She leaned forward and gave him a tentative sniff. "Nettlepaw, could you see if you can find any thyme, please?"

The little apprentice eagerly nodded and raced off into the shadows. Cragpaw numbly watched after her, tucking his tail close to his body as a shiver broke across his skin.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, ducking his head. "I don't know what I was thinking."

"You weren't thinking at all," Stumpwhisker growled, eyeing the apprentice through the corners of his slitted eyes.

Cragpaw's stomach flipped. A few minutes later, with the moon rising in the distance, Nettlepaw returned with some leaves clamped between her teeth. She passed them to Minnowsong, who then gave them to Cragpaw.

"Eat these. If you're going into shock, they should help."

Obediently, he lapped up the bitter tasting plant and swallowed. He shuddered, but already the calming effects of the herb were coming into play.

Morningshine glanced towards the moon. "If you're feeling better now, we should get moving. Dapplepaw is likely waiting already."

Cragpaw nodded, and the medicine cats all stood up and continued their trek towards Highstones. Nightpaw lingered ahead of

Cragpaw, padding alongside Stumpwhisker. The tom asked questions as they passed by new plants, his golden eyes bright with his thirst for knowledge as the tension slowly left his shoulders.

The tufts of grass smoothed to stone as the cats began their ascent. Cragpaw's paws stopped shaking as he placed them carefully against the cold, hard earth, and the sour stench of fear that oozed from his pelt faded.

His ears pricked as ahead, he picked up the sound of more, lighter pawsteps. A little she-cat poked her head over a crest of rock, her blue-green eyes shimmering in the expanding moonlight. Leaping up, she flourished her dark tail eagerly behind her and scrambled down the hill to meet the other medicine cats.

"You're here!" She mewed eagerly, stretching her neck high to touch her nose to Morningshine's. She turned to the other medicine cats and dipped her head. Her eyes widened as she spotted Cragpaw and Nightpaw. "There are new cats," she stage-whispered. "Who are they?"

Cragpaw blinked at the she-cat as she curiously padded forward, giving the two toms a ginger glance. She was surprisingly short. Smaller than Hollykit, even, and she hardly stood taller than Stumpwhisker's belly. Her fur was dark with faint tortoiseshell dapples spreading across her pelt.

"I'm Nightpaw," Nightpaw introduced with a smile. "That foul-smelling tom is my brother, Cragpaw."

"Brothers!" The she-cat exclaimed. "Well, I'm Dapplepaw. It's a pleasure to meet you," she leaned forward and gave a big sniff, wrinkling her nose. "StarClan, you *do* smell. Did you roll under a monster or something?"

Cragpaw's scruff bristled and heat rushed to his ears. His bushed tail flicked back and forth. "Something like that, I guess," he grumbled.

Her eyes widened. "What do you—"

"That's enough, Dapplepaw," Morningshine softly scolded. "The

moon is nearly at its peak. We must hurry."

Dapplepaw fluffed out her dark fur with a snort. "*Okay*, okay, fine." She shot a determined glare at Cragpaw. "But that doesn't mean you're free, little tom!"

Cragpaw blinked as they continued moving up the hill. *Little?* He turned his eyes to the alarmingly tiny she-cat. He stood considerably taller than her. *How am I* little*?*

In spite of her short stature, Dapplepaw was full of energy as the medicine cats pushed further and further across the rocky terrain. She moved with a bounce to her step and a shining light to her blue-green eyes.

"I used some daisy for Sheepclaw's sore bones today," she sang to Morningshine. "I gave Jaggedtooth a pinch of poppyseeds for his sleeping troubles, like you told me to, and Gorsecloud got some marigold for a thorn in her paw."

"Good job," Morningshine mewed, her brown tail flicking behind her. "And did you give Poplarleaf some borage leaves like I told you to?"

Dapplepaw nodded eagerly. "Yes, I did. I've been checking on her every day, too, to make sure her kits are coming along nicely." She beamed as Morningshine offered her approval.

Curiosity bled at the tip of Cragpaw's tongue, and gradually, he found himself padding beside the black she-cat. "Where's your mentor?" He asked, glancing around at their companions. There were just as many cats as there were before, ignoring the addition of the small apprentice.

Dapplepaw shrugged him off. "I don't have one." She spun around to face him, walking backwards now. "But *you* have a story to tell! What's this about a monster?"

"It's really nothing," Cragpaw grumbled, scuffing his paw against stones.

"You froze in front of a monster!" Nightpaw butted in, his golden

eyes fiery. "You nearly got eaten."

Dapplepaw's eyes widened with sympathy. "You know, I froze on the thunderpath my first time, too."

Nightpaw snorted in disbelief, turning his eyes to glare at the darkening sky.

"Did a monster try to catch you?" Cragpaw murmured.

Dapplepaw shook her head adamantly. "No, I was lucky. Gravelnose helped me cross before any could come." She sighed wistfully, "I miss him, but Morningshine and Waspfur have been a great help. He still assists me at the half-moon Gathering most of the time, anyways."

Cragpaw pricked his ears. "How so?"

Dapplepaw's eyes gleamed with the light of stars. "He visits me from StarClan, of course."

Cragpaw's breath caught in his throat as realization slammed into him. Tonight, he would be in touch with his ancestors, and the connection would last forever. The mysteries of StarClan, of medicine cats, and of his Clan would all be revealed to him.

Minnowsong pulled to a stop, turning to face her fellow medicine cats.

"We're here."

Chapter Eight

Cragpaw peered past Minnowsong's shoulders, his heart thundering in his ears at the sight of the yawning dark cavern. Moonlight shone off of the stone in a silvery sheen of light and painted the cats gray. The older medicine cats nodded to each other, and one by one, they slipped into the cave.

Nightpaw hurried after Stumpwhisker, leaving Cragpaw to linger outside of the entrance.

"Come on, what are you waiting for?" Dapplepaw mewed, glancing over her shoulder. "StarClan won't wait."

Swallowing his nerves, Cragpaw pushed into the dark space. Shadows closed around him. He couldn't see anything, and he could hear the faintest drip of water echoing off the walls. His fur brushed against the walls and the tips of his ears touched the ceiling. Pawsteps shuffled ahead of him, and he caught the slightest murmur of voices—but it wasn't from his fellow medicine cats. They whispered from the walls, drifting wordlessly into his ears. His spine prickled.

A faint breeze flushed against his skin as they passed by what he could only presume to be another corridor, branching off into infinite darkness. He had no idea where he was going, and felt blind and afraid. It was reassuring though, touching his nose to the tip of Dapplepaw's tail. At least he wasn't alone.

As they edged deeper into the mountain, coldness began to creep beneath Cragpaw's fur. His pelt rose slightly to protect himself from the chill.

The blackness gradually began to lighten. A faint silver glow silhouetted the figures ahead of him, and gradually, the thin walls began to stretch wider.

"Wow," Cragpaw breathed.

The cave stretched before him, and the medicine cats slipped around the large blue stone that decorated the center of the room. It glittered faintly in the starlight that twinkled down from a round, yawning hole in the ceiling, but the glow was scarce. Stumpwhisker beckoned Cragpaw to join him, and he slowly padded over, taking in the beauty of the Moonstone.

Cragpaw parted his mouth to inquire, but Stumpwhisker shushed him with a flick of his tail.

"We wait," the tom said quietly.

Cragpaw nodded and settled beside his brother. His breath was bated with excitement and he felt a tingle growing in his paws. He condensed his excitement into the barest twitch of his tail and squeezed his eyes shut.

The darkness behind his eyelids grew brighter.

Cragpaw's eyes shot open and he gasped. The half-moon had begun to shift towards the hole, cascading a bright glow onto the large, glistening stone. The stone caught in the light, shooting rays onto the walls and turning the clearing into a stunning bluish white. The half-moon slid into complete view. The glow it reflected from the rock was nearly blinding.

"Cragpaw, Nightpaw," Stumpwhisker mewed loudly. "Is it your wish to enter into the mysteries of StarClan as medicine cats?" The two apprentices nodded as one, their pelts glowing silver in the stunning moonlight. "Then come forward."

They approached. Cragpaw's feet tingled with nerves as he stood before the menacingly glowing stone. Stumpwhisker turned to the Moonstone. "Warriors of StarClan, I present to you these apprentices. They have chosen the path of a medicine cat. Grant them your wisdom and insight so that they may understand your ways and heal their Clan in accordance with your will."

He smiled, and indicated to the young toms. "Lie down, and press your nose to the stone."

Cragpaw curled his paws beneath himself and shot an uncertain glance past his brother, who had already pressed his nose against the rock. Stumpwhisker nodded encouragingly, the other medicine cats staring on from behind him. Flicking his ears, Cragpaw shut his eyes and leaned forward.

The surface of the glowing stone was remarkably cold. The sensation spread through his body like the talons of a hawk, and with a startled intake of breath, the world fell away beneath him.

Cragpaw felt a scream tugging at his throat, but not even a sound escaped his lips. He struggled against the inky darkness, fear dragging him deeper into nothingness, until at last, a light found him. A single star winked down at him from what he could only assume was the sky, and slowly, it grew in number. Millions of stars dazzled the air, and they began to quickly approach him.

Awe wrapped around him as the specks grew closer, morphing into the figures of cats. One, a young ginger tom, landed softly on the ground, each step sparkling with stars as he wove across the tall locks of silver grass. He blinked fondly at the young tom, his pace slowing as he neared. He pressed his nose to the apprentice's forehead.

"Welcome, Cragpaw," he breathed, his voice carrying as softly as a gentle breeze.

The StarClan cat vanished, and another paced towards him. Cragpaw jolted in shock as he recognized the warrior as Quaildapple. "Welcome to StarClan, Cragpaw," the she-cat echoed.

More voices rose through the air, chanting his name and welcoming him. Star-entwined cats encircled him, their mews rising to the sky and swirling into a mass of stars. Cragpaw's surprise unfurled into astonishment, and he gaped as writhing dots of light flooded the air, flowing in an intricate current around him, bleeding into the pelts of starry cats and stirring waves through his fur.

His heart thundered in his chest as their mews erupted into yowls, clamoring for celebration as he was welcomed as one among their ranks—yet, not quite. He had a paw in both the world of his

ancestors, and a paw in the world of life. He was a medicine cat.

Without warning, everything went blank. Sheer darkness stretched as far as the eye could see. He could feel nothing, taste nothing, sense nothing. Then, there was a plant. A small stem stretched from nothingness, far off into the void, tilting a little green bud innocently in his direction. The blossom unfolded very slightly, revealing little cracks where the individual petals would be, but it didn't open any further. A slight dribble of black liquid crept through the nip of the blossom, dripping soundlessly into emptiness.

Curiosity pricked at his paws, and he padded—if he could even call it that—towards it. His paws stepped on a nothingness that felt like solid ground. Ground that was all too hard. Firmer than stone and even the sturdiest of trees.

His paw dropped into an invisible hole. A scream choked him as he went spiraling into nothingness, clawing at the empty air as fear pressed down on him.

He burst awake, his fur on end. He glanced around to the other medicine cats who were still asleep. The glittering stone had darkened, lit only by the faintest glows of starlight. He pushed himself to his feet and yelped, falling back to the ground. His joints were stiff and pained.

"Easy, Cragpaw," Waspfur purred in amusement. "You've been asleep for a few hours. Rise carefully, lest you hurt yourself."

Cragpaw nodded, licking his parched lips as he rose slowly to his feet. "Is there any water?" He murmured hoarsely.

Waspfur nodded. "There is. Come with me, we'll return by the time they wake."

Obediently, the young tom followed the pale tabby. He assumed they were padding along the corridor they'd entered from, but he couldn't be sure. The entire cave smelt of damp stone, and it was too dark in there for him to recognize any landmarks.

Waspfur dipped to the left, his tail brushing against Cragpaw's muzzle. Cragpaw blinked and turned with him. The steady drip of water grew a little louder.

He pricked his ears as he noticed a faint light from up ahead. His eyes widened as he realized that there was no opening in the ceiling. Rather, the subtle glow was produced from the walls, strange and bright green. It reflected off of a small pool of water, which was filled by a steady drip from stalagmites on the ceiling.

"Is that moss?" The apprentice asked softly, daring not to raise his voice any louder.

Waspfur nodded, kneeling down by the pool and taking a long, deep drink. Cragpaw slithered down beside him, stepping onto a slab near the beautiful pool where he began to lap at the pure liquid. It was the coldest, richest water he'd tasted in his life. As he drank from it, he noticed that it had a faint current, seeping from and beneath the rocks on each side.

He sighed deeply as the liquid soothed his throat, and once content, he stepped away, whisking his tongue across his whiskers to clear away any of the remaining droplets. Waspfur joined him shortly after, smiling warmly at the young apprentice.

"This is the Mossy Cavern," he said, whisking his tail. He regarded Cragpaw silently for a moment. "What did you dream about?"

Cragpaw jolted, glancing over to the medicine cat with wide eyes.

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to. You're welcome to keep your secrets. It's just... *odd* for one to wake up so early."

"Then why are you awake?" Cragpaw shot back, eyes narrowing.

Waspfur shrugged. "I didn't visit StarClan tonight."

"Why not?"

"Sometimes you don't need the word of your ancestors to know

that you're doing things the right way."

Cragpaw huffed, curling his tail over his paws. "You're a weird medicine cat," he grumbled.

Waspfur smiled. "Thanks"

The gray apprentice twitched his whiskers, turning his eyes to study the green moss. It was denser in some spots, producing a neon glow that nearly burned his retinas. "StarClan welcomed me," he said at last. "It was... amazing. It still feels weird. Then, everything went dark."

"And then what?"

Cragpaw considered the plant he'd seen. Its long, green stem tipped by a flowerbud that oozed black droplets. The thought of the plant felt... odd, but in a way he couldn't put words to. He shrugged. "Then I woke up," he lied. Guilt squirmed under his pelt, but he shoved it away and turned back to Waspfur. "What happened on *your* first meeting?"

Waspfur hesitated, his amber eyes glittering with conflict. "I was... welcomed. Like you."

Cragpaw nodded slowly in acceptance, but he couldn't help but feel a light sense of suspicion that stirred in his gut.

Waspfur shook out his pelt and padded away from the pool of water. "We should return now. The others will be waking up soon."

Nodding, Cragpaw trailed after the older tom, casting one last glance towards the glowing pool behind him. They pushed through the tunnels, emerging into the Moonstone cavern a few minutes later. Cragpaw blinked as moments later, the medicine cats began to stir.

Nightpaw woke up first, stars gleaming in his eyes and his fur bristling with excitement. His head jerked around, searching for Cragpaw, before spotting him near the entrance. "I saw StarClan," his brother gasped.

Morningshine purred her amusement as she luxuriously stretched to her paws. "We all did," she commented warmly. She flashed her eyes over to Waspfur and Cragpaw, curiosity dancing in her gaze. "What are you two doing over there?"

Cragpaw opened his mouth to respond, but Waspfur nudged him for silence. "We woke up a few moments ago. Cragpaw had a few questions."

Cragpaw blinked at him in confusion, but kept quiet. Morningshine nodded her acceptance and padded over to join the two, Nightpaw on her tail.

Nightpaw wound around his brother, a purr thrumming from his chest. "You were accepted too, right? Did you see Specklefur?"

"Who's Specklefur?" Cragpaw blinked in confusion.

"He said he was Stumpwhisker's mentor. Who did you see?"

Cragpaw's mouth, though hydrated, suddenly felt dry again. "I-I saw—"

Morningshine batted her tail over his muzzle, and he blinked in confusion. "You don't share your first dream," she hushed.

"But Stumpwhisker said—"

She fixed him with a stern glare, silencing him. He pursed his lips, while Nightpaw's brow furrowed together.

Stumpwhisker woke too, and he idly spoke with Minnowsong, who had Nettlepaw sleepily tucked by her side. Dapplepaw stretched to her paws with boundless energy. Cragpaw stared for a moment, stunned that the WindClan she-cat could still be so lively even after freshly waking up.

The cheerful apprentice skipped over to the gathered cats and smiled."Oh, I can't wait to get home to Hawkpaw and Stormpaw. Did you two enjoy your first meeting?"

"I did," Nightpaw chirped.

"And you?" Her eyes flicked to Cragpaw's.

Cragpaw nodded. "Y-Yeah. It was confusing, though."

Dapplepaw shrugged amiably. "Oh, that's StarClan for you! After your first meeting, they only speak in riddles and vague signs. You'll get used to it." She flicked her tail along Cragpaw's side, her eyes glowing.

"It's time for us to go now," Stumpwhisker said lowly as he joined the talkative apprentices. "Your parents will be worried about you."

Dapplepaw's whiskers twitched in quiet agreement.

Cragpaw nodded quietly. After all of the medicine cats were accounted for, they began to quietly file out of the cavern. The cold darkness, while terrifying before, now whispered soft farewells to Cragpaw's ears, guiding him out with a strange new sense of confidence.

Emerging upon the plateau, the apprentice glanced back at the towering rocks behind him to where the half-moon began dipping behind the hill. A growing excitement fluttered in his heart.

His training to be ThunderClan's next medicine cat had truly begun.

Chapter Nine

Cragpaw peered brightly down into the Sandy Hollow. Surrounded by a thin wall of gorse was a dusty clearing, loose patches of cordgrass clumped together here and there. His ears pricked at the sight of Cricketpaw and Goosepaw sparring, moving fluidly with each strike, dodge, and roll. Once they disengaged, he raised his tail in a hello. He beamed as Cricketpaw waved back.

Turning back to Stumpwhisker, he asked, "Will we be learning any battle moves?"

The older tom shook his head. "Not today."

Cragpaw's face fell, and one of the mentors down below, Viperwing, tilted her cream head. "Cricketpaw and Goosepaw are too far along in their training to be fair opponents. Maybe you can join Hollypaw, Fleckpaw, and Cardinalpaw the next time they're out."

"Can we?" Nightpaw chimed in, his amber eyes gleaming earnestly as he stared up at Stumpwhisker. It had nearly been half a moon since their visit to the Moonstone, and in that time, their former denmates had been appointed to apprenticeship.

The old tom sighed. "Maybe some other time. Herbs are the first thing on my mind today."

Cragpaw flicked his whiskers in acknowledgement, watching as the two older apprentices molded into battle once again. With a complicated sea of battle moves, Cricketpaw swiftly claimed victory, releasing a triumphant yowl. Cragpaw drew his attention away and hurried to catch up with his peers. The three medicine cats trekked along the edges of the Sandy Hollow. Stumpwhisker and Nightpaw were speaking softly to one another, while Cragpaw kept his eyes roaming, hoping to spot the slightest of signs indicating a message from StarClan. Stumpwhisker had introduced him to the idea of omens just a pawful of days ago.

"They could be seen in the slightest difference in the wind," Stumpwhisker meowed. "A strangely shaped cloud, a crippled bird, or even a savage fox. Omens can be anything in our sight, but we must learn to interpret what is from StarClan and what is not. Do you see any omens now?"

Cragpaw looked around. They were in the camp, sitting near the entrance of the medicine den. The sky was ominous and cloudy. Could clouds prophesize a coming rainstorm? *He parted his mouth to speak, but noticed that Nightpaw was still fixedly studying the clearing. Uncertainly, he snapped his jaw shut and returned his eyes to the camp. By the nursery, Fleckkit was getting briskly groomed by Vixensong, while Hollykit and Cardinalkit eagerly fidgeted beside her. A long shadow flitted over them. He glanced up. A cloud had passed over the sun.*

"Are they about to be made apprentices?" Cragpaw mewed excitedly.

"Yes, they are. But did you spot any omens?"

Cragpaw allowed his brow to furrow together. "Was that shadow an omen?"

"No. Nightpaw?"

Nightpaw tested the air. He furrowed his brow. "I don't see anything."

Stumpwhisker smiled. "That's because there are none. You merely made an intuitive guess, Cragpaw, but with an omen, there's always a way to tell, be it in the prickle of your fur or the flash of an uncalled thought. Now, let's sit and wait. Ripestar will be calling a meeting soon."

"Do you see anything that could be of use for Sedgeflight?" Stumpwhisker proposed suddenly, snapping Cragpaw out of his daydreaming.

The apprentice turned his head in the older tom's direction, his amber eyes sharpening intently. *If he's mentioning it, it must be around here somewhere.* His eyes turned to the foliage brimming the Sandy Hollow, scanning for any familiar plants. He let his paws guide him as he slipped closer to the sparring apprentices, his mouth slightly parted to breathe in the scents on the air. There

were so many scents to dig through, and he closed his mouth to slow the influx of smells. He focused on the scents that were closest to him.

Naturally, he found his nose drawn to the smoky, bittersweet scent of a poppy. He leaned close to the flower. Its large quantity of black seeds remained cozily tucked between the petals, but rather than the typical crimson coloration, they were primarily white with fickle splotches of red, stained in a pattern much like a blood stain. His fur prickled. Perhaps *that* was an omen.

"Could this—"

"I found some borage!" Nightpaw exclaimed, his voice cutting clear across Cragpaw's. "Borage is given to queens, right?"

Cragpaw snapped out of his daydreaming, his ears pinned back in embarrassment. His brother cupped the fuzzy stem in his paw a good ways along the border of the clearing, his golden eyes bright with curiosity. Abandoning his find, Cragpaw padded over to join him, staring at the blue flower adorning its bud.

"Move your paw," Stumpwhisker snapped briskly, yanking Nightpaw's foot away with a jerk of his paw.

The black tom blinked in surprise. "What for?"

"See that fuzz?" The older tom gently pointed to the stem with his nose, close enough for his breath to stir it, but not enough to touch it, "It causes irritation if it touches your skin. It's too late for prevention now, so we'll just have to add something to it later to calm the itching."

Nightpaw grimaced, absentmindedly shifting his weight from foot to foot. "Did I at least get it right?"

The older tom sagely nodded. "Yes. Borage is used for helping a queen produce her milk," he glanced at Cragpaw. The tom froze. "Cragpaw, how exactly do you use borage?"

"How do I use borage...?" Cragpaw's relief trickled away, and he crinkled his muzzle in thought. "You chew it into a pulp?"

Stumpwhisker sighed lightly. "No, you simply feed a queen the leaves, which lack the irritants the stem has. Both of you, take a small cluster—but don't strip the entire plant, Cragpaw!" His voice rose slightly in rage, and Cragpaw stopped plucking off the leaves.

"Sorry," the apprentice muttered quietly. Stumpwhisker merely shook his head.

"For StarClan's sake, plants need their leaves to survive." Stumpwhisker briskly stepped over, studying the now leafless plant. "This one will die now. Don't *ever* strip a plant entirely of its leaves. Do you understand?" His golden gaze bore into Cragpaw.

"Yes, Stumpwhisker," the tom mumbled, lowering his head. "I'm sorry."

Stumpwhisker huffed, his eyes narrowed sharply. Cragpaw braced himself for a scolding. "Gather your leaves," the older medicine cat mewed instead. "We'll take these back to camp, then we're going to Snakerocks. I'll be testing you to see what you can find there."

Cragpaw brightened noticeably as he picked up his mouthful of leaves, noting that they were fuzzy, but the little hairs were far fewer than on the stems. He followed quickly after the mottled tom and his brother.

They hadn't gone to Snakerocks yet, but he'd heard all about it from Cricketpaw and Goosepaw's boasting, especially when Cricketpaw had brought home an adder. *That* had been an impressive feat, and she'd even received praise from Ripestar herself. He shivered at the thought. Approval from the Clan leader was a dream come true, but he knew that if he ever wanted a chance at garnering Ripestar's attention, he needed to impress his mentor, first. Keeping his mind on track was proving to be far more difficult than he expected, though, and it had nearly been half a moon since their visit to the Moonstone.

The warm green-leaf was beginning to wane to leaf-fall, the changing season showing itself in the slightly yellower hues in green trees, while a chillier wind ruffled through his fur. The three cats strolled upon the camp. Bumbledusk was sitting sentry, smiling

at them as they pushed through the bramble barrier. Cragpaw moved slowly down the tumble of rocks, finding it difficult to balance with a mouth full of leaves. Finally though, the trio made it to the bottom and brushed towards the medicine den.

"Smokebird?" Stumpwhisker's voice was tinted with surprise as they emerged from the fern tunnel, golden-hued light dappling his fur from the fern cover above. "What are you doing in here?"

The dark tabby smiled softly from within the den. "Hi, Stumpwhisker. Sorry to intrude, but I think I caught something from Glazefall. She's been sick for the last few sunrises, and now my stomach's hurting, too." She glanced at the two apprentices from where they stood between the ferns. "I made a bit of a mess behind the dirtplace," she added, more quietly now.

Stumpwhisker's eyes sharpened to slits and he quickly padded over, circling around the young warrior. "Why hasn't your sister come to see me?"

"Oh, she tried a toad the other day. I suppose she thought it was from that, but now that I've caught it," she flicked her ears pointedly, "I'll tell her to stop by."

Stumpwhisker huffed, his unamusement clear. Then he gently prodded her stomach. After a few heartbeats he froze, his whiskers growing still in shock. "Cragpaw, Nightpaw, come over here."

Smokebird's eyes widened slightly in fear, and her gaze flashed between the two apprentices as they tentatively approached. Cragpaw left his herbs by the entrance, his nostrils flaring intensely as he tried to catch the scent of sickness.

"Press your paws to her stomach and tell me what you feel." Before Stumpwhisker took a step away, he reassuringly gave Smokebird a lick behind the ears. "You're fine," he murmured tenderly. "I wouldn't worry if I were you."

This only seemed to make the flighty warrior more nervous, but she kept steady, warily eyeing Nightpaw and Cragpaw. Cragpaw breathed in slowly. A strange, yet very faintly sweet smell

permeated from the warrior. Nightpaw lifted a paw first, gently pressing it against the warrior's belly, while Cragpaw followed slowly in suit. Her belly felt slightly swollen, but it had a distinct firmness to it. *Perhaps she's bloated?*

"Have you eaten anything that might've gone bad recently?" Cragpaw instinctually asked, his eyes narrowed slightly.

Smokebird shook her head, and at the same time, Nightpaw gasped in surprise, "She's expecting kits!"

"You're correct. Good job, Nightpaw," Stumpwhisker praised. Cragpaw whipped his head around in bewilderment, his jaw gaping slightly at Stumpwhisker's approving smile.

Smokebird stiffened under his careful paws. "You're saying I'm pregnant?" She mewed, her voice nearly a hiss.

Stumpwhisker nodded. "Congratulations."

"But I'm hardly a warrior," her ears flattened, anxiety flashing in her eyes. "Will I really be okay to be expecting so early?"

"Under the guidance of three sets of paws, you'll be just fine," Stumpwhisker reassured. "I'd recommend speaking to Rattail. She's carried many litters in her lifetime. I'll let Ripestar know you'll be off duty for the next few moons."

In any other circumstance, the shock that swirled in Smokebird's expression would have been amusing, but all Cragpaw felt was sympathy swelling in his chest. "Who's the father?" He inquired, his voice barely a pip.

Stumpwhisker shot the apprentice a fierce glare. "We don't ask queens unless they're willing to tell," he snapped. He turned apologetically back to Smokebird. "Don't feel obliged to share."

Smokebird nodded numbly, standing slowly to her paws. "Thank you," she mumbled. Without another word, the tabby fled the den, her pelt slightly bristled in anxiety.

Chapter Ten

Cragpaw watched Smokebird race back into the clearing. *She doesn't seem too happy about the news,* he noted. *Could it be that she doesn't want kits?* He tried to place a paw on any toms who may be the father, but as he dug into his thoughts, he realized that he hardly saw the warrior around camp at all.

"With that handled," Stumpwhisker mewed curtly, "the two of you had better get your borage sorted on the shelves. We'll need as much as possible for when her kits come."

Nodding, Cragpaw returned to the leaves he'd dropped near the entrance. They had scattered from Smokebird's exit, and he moved as swiftly as he could, scooping them back into a pile from where they had flitted off to. Once they were gathered, he brought them over to the shelf and neatly sorted them with the rest of the borage leaves he could find.

He glossed a paw over them, intently studying their features. They were oval-shaped, had a small coating of fuzz over them, and had wavy edges. He inhaled deeply; their smell reminded him of a fresh, cool breeze.

"*Borage.* This is borage," he whispered to himself in an attempt to engrave it into his mind.

"Are you two done yet?" Stumpwhisker snapped over Cragpaw's shoulder.

The apprentice jumped in alarm. "Y-Yes, sorry," he mumbled.

"Good. Do you know what we use for skin irritation?" The medicine cat abruptly demanded. Cragpaw glanced to his side to see Nightpaw nibbling at his paw pad. His stomach plummeted.

"No," he glanced at the floor, scuffing his paws against the earth.

"Good," Stumpwhisker mewed, much to the apprentice's surprise. "I haven't told you yet. I'd be confused if you somehow already knew."

Relief poured over Cragpaw, and he smiled slightly. "Oh." He watched as Stumpwhisker began probing through the shelves. "I know the stem of borage causes irritation, but why don't the leaves?"

"The hairs are too small to penetrate the skin," Stumpwhisker explained. "The stems have long hairs that cause itchiness after too much exposure. Considering how Nightpaw held the stem for so long," the black tom lowered his head, "there's no doubt in my mind that it's itching up a storm. Am I correct?"

Nightpaw meekly nodded. "Yes."

"Here," Stumpwhisker pulled a leaf from the shelf. He passed it to Cragpaw.

He blinked at it. It had serrated leaves and was slightly crushed. "What is it?"

"It's stinging nettle."

"Won't it... sting?" Cragpaw gave it a tentative sniff, but no bristles poked at him.

"When we harvest stinging nettle, we carve off the needles with either a piece of bark or stone. It can cause severe irritation, but when chewed into a pulp, it's excellent for curing such ailments." He blinked calmly. "Treat his paws."

Cragpaw froze for a moment. Tentatively, he took the herb into his mouth. His thoughts, weighted beneath a blanket of anxiety, moved slowly. *He said to chew it into a pulp, didn't he?* His eyes flitted to Stumpwhisker, and he dug his teeth lightly into the herb. The older medicine cat watched calmly. Taking this as a confirmation, Cragpaw began to slowly chew.

The flavor was rich and earthy with almost a bitter tang, but the tang wasn't strong enough to bother him. He chewed until the leaf had grown into a sticky mush, and he turned a paw over and spat

onto the pads. The sticky green juice glittered up at him. He turned to his brother.

"Give me your paws," he instructed. Nightpaw tilted one paw up. Cragpaw took the sticky mess and scrubbed it gently between his brother's pads, and the black tom noticeably relaxed. "Show me your next one." Nightpaw did just that, and once Cragpaw was finished, they shared a sigh of relief.

Stumpwhisker nodded his head in acknowledgement and produced a small pawful of spiderwebs. "Now we wrap it to keep the poultice in place."

Cragpaw scooped the pawful of webs out of Stumpwhisker's paws, then turned to wrap them generously around Nightpaw's. By the end of it, his brother's paws were completely hidden beneath the gauze.

"Next time, try to apply a bit less," Stumpwhisker said. "Cobwebs can be easy to find, but too much can collect moisture, which is bad for the wound."

"Okay."

"Now, what do you use to soothe bellyaches?" Stumpwhisker inquired.

"Oh, that's easy," Nightpaw purred. "We use chamomile, don't we?"

"Yes, we use chamomile. Go fetch some for me from the shelf, I'd like to check on Glazefall before we head for Snakerocks." The tom's twisted whiskers shivered slightly, a soft flame dancing in his eyes.

Cragpaw watched as his brother grabbed a few shoots of chamomile, and the three pushed back out into the clearing. Stumpwhisker led the way to the bramble bush that hid the warrior's den, ducking his head inside. "Is Glazefall in here?" He called.

Cragpaw picked up the faintest response of, "yes, I'm here."

After a few moments, Glazefall pushed out of the den, moss sticking

out of her pelt. Cragpaw sucked in a breath. The she-cat certainly looked ill, with a slightly stuffy nose and a hoarse voice when she spoke. "What is it, Stumpwhisker?" She murmured sleepily.

Stumpwhisker stared at her pointedly. "You're sick," he said. It wasn't a question.

The dark tabby crinkled her nose unhappily. "Let me guess, Smokebird told you?" She grunted.

"I'm a medicine cat. I'll find out one way or another," the tom absently said, circling the she-cat and giving her pelt a ginger sniff. "Cragpaw, Nightpaw, come here and tell me what you smell."

The two apprentices slipped forward. Cragpaw parted his mouth slightly as he sniffed her pelt, then he leaned close to her muzzle and tested the scent of her breath. It simply smelt of old prey and stomach bile, but not quite the sour tang of illness.

While he and Nightpaw did that, Stumpwhisker continued to study the warrior while asking questions. "When did this start?"

"A few sunrises ago."

"Did you stay out all night? Did you eat anything rancid?"

"No, I've done nothing different, other than trying a toad."

"Could she be pregnant, too?" Cragpaw suddenly proposed, noticing a slight, yet oddly firm tenderness to her stomach. Above that, he could taste the same sweet scent he'd caught on Smokebird, yet it was much fainter and almost impossible to notice. "Queens get sick sometimes from the growth of kits, right?" He tilted his head as he recalled his time in the nursery. When Sedgeflight had been expecting, the gentle she-cat had suffered quite a bit from "mother's sickness," as Strikefeather called it.

"Don't be a mouse-brain," Stumpwhisker sharply replied, keeping his attention on Glazefall. "While queens can get sick from their pregnancy on occasion, I've never seen one sick like this before. I'd reckon the swelling is from something she ate."

"Don't you smell—"

Stumpwhisker brushed past Cragpaw, cutting him off. He took the chamomile from Nightpaw and dropped them at Glazefall's paws. "Eat these," he mewed. "They should help calm your sickness. Keep resting like you have been, and come see me in the evening with an update on your status." His whiskers twitched. "If you're not feeling any better, let me know, and I'll see if I can find some other remedy."

Glazefall lapped up the green shoots. "Thanks."

Cragpaw stared after the warrior with a frown, twitching his tail.

"Come on." Stumpwhisker began padding towards the camp entrance. Cragpaw's thoughts trickled off and he scampered after him, his excitement replenished as they swiftly ascended the ravine's exit. His eyes sharpened as he studied the cool forest, hoping to spot Snakerocks before Stumpwhisker announced their arrival.

It didn't take long until the tom caught sight of a clearing through the trees, bright sunlight reflecting off a vast array of flat-faced, stone slabs. Some were stacked high into the air, leaning against one another in unsteady piles, while the rest lay evenly on the ground. The rocks stretched on for a long while, until at last they dissipated among more trees on the other side. Their sand-colored faces were bare. The apprentice caught the faintest flicker of movement between the cracks—a snake, perhaps?

"Is this it?" the apprentice chirped, darting to Stumpwhisker's other side where he fell into step with his brother.

"Yes," Stumpwhisker mewed, his rough voice quiet amid the eerie silence. "We must tread carefully. Adders have made this their home."

Cragpaw nodded. Adders didn't seem so scary, especially after he'd seen the one caught by Cricketpaw. They were long and had big fangs, but he doubted they were as dangerous as the older cats made them out to be.

Stumpwhisker's steps softened as he drew his haunches up beneath him, but he didn't pad in quite the hunter's crouch. Cragpaw followed his lead. He struggled to proportion himself just right to walk quietly, focusing so intently on the softness of each step that he continuously crunched on leaves and foliage.

"You're terrible at this," Nightpaw snarked as he slipped stealthily forward, his black pelt rippling as his muscles worked carefully.

Cragpaw snorted. "At least I'm trying."

"So am I," Nightpaw retorted. "But I'm not making a racket."

"Quiet, you two," Stumpwhisker snarled. The apprentices' mouths snapped shut, but not before Cragpaw furiously stuck his tongue out at his brother.

The trio entered the clearing. The sun, amid the slightly chilly breeze, comfortably warmed Cragpaw's pelt. Stumpwhisker stood straight, drinking in deep breaths of the air. "I think we're safe, but watch your step."

Cragpaw gratefully stood straight, his head swiveling back and forth. He and Nightpaw followed the old tom as they leaped onto the rocks. Stumpwhisker grabbed a small stick as he moved.

Tufts of grass and minor foliage poked out from between rocks, and Cragpaw spotted some moss growing on the underside of some stones. Cobwebs draped deep into the shadows, and he caught sight of the beady eyes of spiders.

"Do you see any herbs around here?" Stumpwhisker mewed, glancing at the two toms.

Nightpaw ducked low, nearly pressing his chin to his paws as he peered along the rim of the stones, while Cragpaw remained standing, his eyes narrowed sharply.

"I don't see anything," the dark gray tom pouted, his tail twitching slightly behind him.

Stumpwhisker turned his eyes to his darker brother. "And you,

Nightpaw?"

Nightpaw's whiskers flicked and he stood up again. "No."

"Well clearly, neither of you were looking hard enough." Stumpwhisker jerked his muzzle, pointing to a crack just before their feet, where a wide-spreading, fern-like plant grew between the slabs of stone.

Cragpaw wrinkled his nose. There was only one herb like that, but he couldn't quite place its name. "Is it... juniper?" He suggested leerily. His thoughts whirled under Stumpwhisker's disbelieving gaze. "Wait, no! Juniper has berries!" He ducked, his face burning in embarrassment.

Nightpaw's ear flicked, a smirk dancing on the corner of his lips. "It's chervil, isn't it?" He proposed.

"Yes, it's chervil." Stumpwhisker visibly relaxed. "What do you use it for?"

Cragpaw remained silent as his brother tilted his black head. "It's used for infected wounds, isn't it? And can't the roots be used to soothe bellyaches?"

Stumpwhisker nodded. "Exactly. Excellent work, Nightpaw," he praised. His tail flicked gently along the black tom's shoulder. "Now, let's collect some. We already have a healthy helping of watermint, so the roots are unneeded. And remember, don't strip all of the leaves. Only take as much as is needed."

Cragpaw nodded, envy twisting in his gut at the eager glow in Nightpaw's eyes. *So what if he remembers things better? I can be good at other things. Like prophecies and visions.*

He huffed, carefully dropping into the shallow crevice without another word. He gently began nipping off bits of the stem that branched off into hundreds of soft leaves until he felt he'd collected enough. He looked at his pile, then back to the bush. His pile was generous, but the bush remained hale and healthy, still strongly decorated in its plumage. On the other side of the bush, Nightpaw

had collected less than him, and so had Stumpwhisker.

Cragpaw leaped back to the top of the stone, and the other two joined him shortly after. Stumpwhisker assessed at him quietly. "You still collected too much this time," he grunted. "Most of that will be dried up before we can use it, and the juices are what we need."

"Oh," Cragpaw mewed softly, his ears drooping. "Sorry."

Stumpwhisker simply shook his head, scooped up his mouthful of greens, and began the trek back to camp. Nightpaw hurried to walk side-by-side with the medicine cat, his tail high over his spine, while Cragpaw trailed a few tail-lengths behind. He dejectedly scuffed at the ground with his paws.

By the time they returned to camp, darkness had already fallen. The sun had just dipped beneath the horizon, the remaining light casting long shadows in the camp. Glazefall was eating a thrush in the corner of the clearing with Sparkclaw, and she brightened at the sight of the three medicine cats. She quickly abandoned her food and hurried over, the ginger tom trailing happily at her side.

"Cragpaw was right," she gasped, excitement shining in her eyes. "I went to see Rattail with Smokebird, and she said I'm expecting kits!"

"I'm going to be a father," Sparkclaw purred.

Cragpaw dropped his herbs in surprise. "Oh, congratulations!" He choked out.

Stumpwhisker blinked slowly. "That's wonderful news. Did the chamomile help at all?"

Glazefall nodded. "Yes, I'm feeling mostly better because of it, thank you. I'm worried I may fall sick again tomorrow, though. Do you think I could have some more?"

"Not so soon," the tom mewed. "You seem to have a bad case of mother's sickness, and while it helps to soothe it, too much can cause early contractions. Try to sleep and drink more, and eat right

when you wake up. If none of that works, find something mild to chew on, like grass. Once you start, it shouldn't be so bad anymore."

"Okay, thank you." Glazefall dipped her head politely, her eyes shining with excitement as she and Sparkclaw returned to their meal.

Cragpaw spun around to look at Stumpwhisker, his eyes gleaming. "I told you so!" He exclaimed, his eyes glowing with elation.

Stumpwhisker blinked in acknowledgement. "So you did. Now, fetch yourselves something to eat, I'll take the thyme to the stores. You both worked hard today."

Nodding eagerly, Cragpaw raced off to the fresh-kill pile, his brother trotting along a few tail-lengths behind.

Chapter Eleven

Cragpaw's eyes fluttered open, struggling to adjust to the darkness of night. The air was eerily still, only the soft breaths of Stumpwhisker and Nightpaw stirring the silence.

Something felt off, but he couldn't place what it was.

Rising to his paws, he shook out his legs, stiffened from sleep. A hacking sound caught his attention. He flicked his ears in its direction, discovering that it was in one of the further corners of the den. *The secret passage,* he realized. His pelt bristled slightly as on sleep-worn paws, he slipped towards the corridor.

Ivystorm, he assumed, groaned in pain, his coughing growing ever more violent. The sound of liquid splattering onto the floor made Cragpaw flatten his ears, and his heart rate picked up slightly in his anxiety. Swallowing his fear, he pushed aside the fern.

Ivystorm convulsed in his nest. Low, painful moans escaped his chest as his eyes rolled back in his head, leaving only the whites visible. Thick black liquid crept from his mouth and foamed at the edges, staining the floor and the nest. As he seized, a cough began to shake him, making the twitches of his body ever more violent. Cragpaw found himself frozen, unable to tear his eyes away from the scene.

Ivystorm's glazed eyes rolled back into place as his spine arched back unnaturally, the agonized whimpers he uttered barely whispers in the quiet of night. His eyes fixed hauntingly to the watching apprentice, his jaw parted in a silent scream. Cragpaw could hear the faintest pleas for help, but he was frozen solid. His claws itched to move, to save him, but it was as if his body had completely shut down.

As he stood there, watching his Clanmate convulse, his sharp movements gradually grew slower and more feeble. His breathing became laborious, until at last, he spasmed one final time and fell

still.

Cragpaw's frozen legs finally found leverage to move, and he stumbled forward, hardly staying on his paws. He tenderly reached a paw to the warrior's pulse, the air thick with the stench of his fear as he confirmed the undeniable.

Ivystorm was gone.

❀

The vigil for Ivystorm's death had gone by swiftly, much like when Quaildapple had died. Grievers were allowed only brief visits, quickly ushered away by Stumpwhisker once they had overstayed their welcome. As soon as sunhigh arrived, Rattail and Stumpwhisker had taken his body to be buried somewhere in the forest where he would inevitably be forgotten among the foliage.

Cragpaw couldn't stop thinking of his death. The grief that had swept the Clan was swift, particularly emphasized by Puddlebounce, who's wails had split the sky in an earth-shattering intensity. The two cats had been terribly close since their parents had died many moons ago, claimed by a twoleg trap. Now, the poor warrior was all alone.

Cragpaw felt sick to his stomach. Why couldn't he have saved Ivystorm? He was a medicine cat, for StarClan's sake! A sense of uselessness clawed at his throat, and he flexed his claws, squeezing his eyes shut. Not even the comfort from Strikefeather nor Larkbite over the last few days could lift his guilt. Even worse, he could only assume that Grassystep would be joining Ivystorm shortly. While he prayed to StarClan for the gray she-cat to survive, he knew it was only a matter of time from how the warrior's coughing grew progressively worse.

He scarfed down the mouse he'd collected, rasping his tongue over his whiskers as cats gradually began to gather at the camp entrance. Even Glazefall and Smokebird were tagging along, against Stumpwhisker's better judgment. Sparkclaw tightly clung to Glazefall's side, their eyes hot with excitement and tails entwined, while Smokebird remained hunched over and anxiety-ridden,

though she appeared slightly more at ease in her sister's presence.

Dawnkit, Slightkit, and Flowerkit watched from the nursery, wrapped under Sedgeflight's gentle tail. Cragpaw dully waved his tail towards them, earning their eager squeals as they fought to wave back. Slightkit clambered onto her mother's back, and the queen lightly growled at the she-cat. The kits were three moons old now, and were growing quite large already. His pained exterior cracked slightly as the white she-kit tumbled gleefully from her mother's shoulders.

"Oh, I can't believe this is going to be our first Gathering!" Hollypaw squealed, snatching Cragpaw's attention as she bounced in place. "Cragpaw, aren't you excited?" She spun around to face him, her whiskers twitching.

Cragpaw shrugged. "More or less," he grumbled, though there was a severe lack of enthusiasm in his voice.

She ignored his pessimism with a flick of her ears as she turned to Nightpaw. "And you?"

Nightpaw smiled warmly at the tortoiseshell. "Of course I'm excited. I'm not boring... like a *mouse*."

Cardinalpaw snickered while Hollypaw narrowed her eyes, loudly scolding the black tom.

Cragpaw's ear twitched, but he let no more reaction show, instead tuning them out and turning his eyes to the camp entrance where Ripestar and Larkbite slowly padded to the front of the gathered cats. His father was deep in conversation with the Clan leader, his eyes dark with seriousness. His amber eyes flicked, catching Cragpaw's, and he gave a slight nod and smile to his son before returning his attention to the pale ginger she-cat.

Cragpaw swallowed and began kneading at the ground. It wasn't long until Ripestar turned to face the patrol, lifting her tail above her spine. "Is everybody ready?"

Her announcement was acknowledged by cheers as mutually shared

anticipation flooded from the assembled cats. Hollypaw bounced up and down, her green eyes shining with irrefutable excitement. Her tortoiseshell tail draped over Fleckpaw's side as the mute tom also jumped in place. Though less enthusiastically, his eyes still shone.

"Then let's go!"

Cragpaw remained at the back of the group as an eager chatter filled the air. Nearly half the Clan was in assembly, pushing towards the bramble tunnel and clambering out of the ravine. He watched as Glazefall and Smokebird climbed up especially carefully, and was surprised to see even Rattail nimbly joining her Clanmates.

It took some time until it was finally Cragpaw's turn to climb up. Through the lengthening shadows of night, it required a fair amount of effort to keep from falling down. Eventually, he made it to the top, shaking grit out of his fur as he padded over to join his Clan.

There were only a few more cats lingering within the camp, and once they joined the rest at the top of the ravine, the patrol began moving through the forest. It was completely dark out aside from the bright moon and starlight, leaving a silvery glow upon the terrain. It was strange to be traversing through the forest in complete darkness, and Cragpaw was surprised to realize that he could hear more wildlife scurrying about than in the daytime hours, except for the singsong tone of birds.

A few of the younger warriors, such as Eggtuft, Streamfur, and Sparkclaw were attentively watching their surroundings, while the more experienced ones simply chatted idly. Sparkclaw sent a sly grin towards Glazefall.

"Would you like something to eat, m'lady?" The tom purred, his tone picking up an unfamiliar accent.

Glazefall laughed loudly. "Now? I don't think we're allowed to eat during the Gathering, love."

Sparkclaw fluffed out his pelt. "I recall nothing of the sort! Wait here." He darted off into the underbrush, leaving Glazefall staring

after him. Her sister remained by her side, visibly uncomfortable.

The tom cried out in surprise. Instinctively, Cragpaw plunged into the underbrush, his nostrils flaring and tail flicking around in worry. He found Sparkclaw in only a moment. The ginger-and-white tom scrubbed his nose with a paw.

"What's the matter?" Cragpaw asked, his amber eyes rapidly searching the tom's pelt for any sign of injury, as Stumpwhisker had taught him to do.

"I think something stung me," the warrior grumbled. "It feels like a million thorns have been shoved up my nose."

The gray apprentice cringed. "May I see it?" He asked gently, wracking his brain for any instruction he'd been given for stings.

Sparkclaw drew his paw away, exposing his pink nose, which was already beginning to swell. In fact, at the point of the red, irritated bump, he could see the black nub of a stinger.

"It must've been a bee," he declared. Stumpwhisker had taught him about bee stings at some point, that he was certain. He needed to carefully remove the stinger and apply treatment immediately. *But how did he say to treat it?* Cragpaw flattened his ears and frowned in concentration, but still, nothing came to mind. With shame swimming beneath his fur, he jerked his head towards the patrol. "I don't remember what to do," he mumbled apologetically, "but Stumpwhisker should know."

Sparkclaw nodded, scrunching his muzzle. Cragpaw picked up to a trot and scurried towards the front of the patrol, leaving Glazefall to meow a loud inquiry while her mate followed closely behind him. Stumpwhisker was strolling alongside Ripestar, the two cats speaking softly.

"Stumpwhisker?" Cragpaw mewed anxiously, darting up beside the older tom. He continued speaking, ignoring the apprentice. "Stumpwhisker, I need your help!" Cragpaw said, louder this time.

"What is it, Cragpaw?" Stumpwhisker hissed, his whiskers flicking

irritably as he redirected his attention towards the apprentice. "I'm busy speaking here."

"I'm sorry, but I think Sparkclaw got stung by a bee, and I'm not sure how to treat it." The gray tom's tail drooped as he continued, shame swallowing him whole.

Stumpwhisker sighed. "Please give me a minute, Ripestar. We'll continue after I've dealt with this."

From under the full moon's light, Cragpaw couldn't make out Ripestar's expression, but he did see her tail flick and her teeth flash under the moonlight as she uttered a few more words. Then, Stumpwhisker peeled away from the group of cats, taking a step to the side where he could take a closer look at Sparkclaw.

"You forgot what I taught you about bee stings?" He growled, gently pressing a paw to Sparkclaw's chin. He pushed slightly, prompting the young warrior to tilt his head.

"Yes, Stumpwhisker..."

The old tom snorted softly. "Do you see your brother anywhere? He's much better at remembering things than you are."

The blood roaring in his ears, Cragpaw turned his amber gaze back to the patrol. Cats padded along, their pelts silver under the moon's wavering glow, their eyes flashing as they darted in his direction and reflecting its stunning light. He spotted Nightpaw trailing near the middle of the swarm of cats, perfectly in step with Hollypaw. Her littermates were merely two steps behind.

"No," said Cragpaw, his heart pounding at how easily the lie slipped out. "I can't tell where he is."

Stumpwhisker sighed gustily. "All right, then. Come with me. You, too," he beckoned Sparkclaw along. "Do you remember *anything* that might be helpful for a bee sting?" The old tom growled as he trudged through the trees, peering through the undergrowth.

"N-Not exactly," Cragpaw stammered. "I know we need something to soothe the swelling, and removing the stinger is a lot like

removing a thorn, but we need to be extra careful so we don't push the stinger deeper in. That would only make the swelling worse." He could visualize the procedure perfectly, but the toughest part was remembering the herbs.

He stifled the growl that rose in his throat and turned it into a grunt instead, his tail twitching behind him.

"Remembering the methods is only half of the treatment. You can't be a medicine cat if you can't remember the medicine," Stumpwhisker scolded. "Look over there," he pointed with his tail towards a dark mass hugging a trunk. Nestled in the space between the trunk and a branch, its lumpy skin glowed silver under the moonlight. "Do you know what that is?"

Cragpaw wrinkled his nose. "No."

"That's a beehive. It was abandoned in new-leaf, but it's still rich with honey. Take this stick and get a nice, big glob of it."

"Are you sure it's abandoned?"

"Positive."

Stumpwhisker thrust the stick towards Cragpaw. Tenderly, Cragpaw closed his teeth around it. With a glance over his shoulder, he began inching towards the beehive, his nose twitching nervously.

The trunk belonged to a marvelous oak. It was tall, and the knots in its bark were like angry faces staring down at him. Beneath the branch that held the beehive was another branch. It was larger than the one that carried the beehive, but not by much. He narrowed his eyes in thought. It was large enough to safely carry his weight—or so he hoped. He'd never climbed a tree before.

Shaking out his unease, Cragpaw clenched his teeth tighter around the stick and dug his claws into the bark. It was an uncomfortable sensation, and his muzzle scrunched as the sensation worsened when he gave it his full body weight. One paw at a time, he hauled himself up the trunk. Carefully finding his footing, he found the branch and slunk onto it. He kept his body close to the bark,

struggling to keep his eyes away from the forest floor.

A fall from this height would be devastating, he thought uneasily.

His tail whisked behind him for balance, and he twisted his neck to stare up at the beehive. Shuffling around on the branch, he managed to turn around. With his tail lashing behind him, he carefully rose onto his hindlegs and propped his forepaws onto the trunk. He leaned up as high as he could, waving the stick around and struggling to come into contact with the beehive, but to no avail.

He dropped back to his haunches and huffed, placing down the stick and trapping it under his forepaw.

"It's too high up," he called down to Stumpwhisker. "What now?"

"Get up on the branch and try to knock it down," the medicine cat replied. "If it's too dangerous, come back down."

Cragpaw grabbed the stick. While the beehive was terribly high, he wanted to do it. He *needed* to do it. He had to show Stumpwhisker that he was good enough to be his apprentice. That he *could* be helpful, even if it took him longer to remember things.

Steeling himself, he scrambled up the remaining distance to the branch above. He lowered himself onto the branch and carefully dug his claws into the bark. It trembled under his weight. He remained as still as possible until it settled. Vertigo swallowed his vision as he lowered his chin to the branch and peered down at the forest floor. He closed his eyes with a deep, steadying breath, then opened them back up.

Digging his claws deep into the bark, he stretched his neck as far as he could and peered beneath the branch. The beehive was silent. Carefully edging closer, he poked it with his stick. It was firm, but a faint crackling signaled the impact.

"Careful, Cragpaw," Stumpwhisker warned.

Cragpaw gritted his teeth tighter around his stick. With more force this time, he jabbed it at the beehive. A *crack* cut through the air.

The beehive broke in two, and one half went tumbling down through the branches. Cragpaw dropped his stick and yowled triumphantly, bouncing back.

The branch shuddered under his weight.

The apprentice gasped, dropping his body to completely hug the branch, his knuckles pulsating as he dug his claws deep into the wood. Fear washed over him as the branch groaned, wobbling unsteadily.

Then, he heard a crunch.

Cragpaw yowled as the branch fell from underneath him, and his paws flailed wildly as he plummeted with it. His body slammed onto the branch he'd climbed atop of previously. The impact of the fall knocked the breath out of him. With every ounce of strength he had, he dug his claws in and held onto it before gravity could take hold of him.

His muscles straining, he managed to drag his lower body up onto the surface. Hugging the branch, he hurried towards the base of it and pressed his pelt against the sturdy trunk of the tree. He looked down at his paws. They were shaking.

"Cragpaw, are you okay?" Stumpwhisker called up.

"Y-Yeah," Cragpaw replied, his voice trembling. "Just fine!"

"Then get your paws back on some solid ground. That was a close fall!"

"I'll be just a minute! I-I can't move right now."

"Take your time."

Cragpaw closed his eyes and breathed deeply. After a few steadying minutes, he finally found the courage to dig his claws back into the tree and slowly lower himself back down. The moment his paws touched the leaf-litter, he freed a deep sigh of relief.

"Thank StarClan," he muttered, shaking the anxiety out of his pelt.

He drew his attention to Stumpwhisker. The older tom was studying him, his golden eyes darting all over Cragpaw's pelt.

"Clean yourself up. I already took care of Sparkclaw," he said. "You're lucky that branch was there to catch you. I might've been short one apprentice if it hadn't been." His whiskers twitched, but the amusement was lost upon Cragpaw. Instead, his anxiety wriggled itself a little deeper in his belly.

"So..." Cragpaw paused to steady himself. "Honey is used to soothe a bee sting?" He meowed, his voice stronger this time.

"Honey to soothe the sting, and stinging nettle to soothe the swelling," Stumpwhisker explained. "Alternatively, we could rub in the juice of \marigold, which is what I did since we have some nearby. I would've shown you myself, but I couldn't make the poor tom wait." His eyes softened as he surveyed Cragpaw. "You did a good job, keeping your head on. Most cats would've panicked and fallen."

Cragpaw's ears burned at the praise. "Thanks," he mumbled.

Stumpwhisker huffed. "Look over here," he said instead.

Taking a deep breath, Cragpaw trotted over to Stumpwhisker's side. The older tom tapped a paw on the broken half of the beehive. Its golden innards appeared slick and full of amber ooze, and the smell that wafted from it was deliciously sweet. Cragpaw leaned in closer and inhaled deeply.

"It smells delicious," he mewed, his mouth watering. He took a step away, rasping his tongue impulsively over his whiskers. "And we can't just eat it?"

"No. We can't eat it because abandoned hives are far too rare, just like catmint." He paused for a few, long moments. "But... I suppose we can make an exception this one time." The old tom's eyes twinkled. "Go on, give it a lick."

Cragpaw blinked in shock. "R-really?"

Stumpwhisker snorted. "Don't make me regret it. We don't have all

night."

Eagerly, Cragpaw poked his tongue against the stickiness, and rasped up a small mouthful. The sweetness bathed over his tongue and stuck to his teeth as he swallowed, a purr erupting in his chest. If StarClan had a taste, *this* is what he imagined it would taste like.

"That's delicious," he thrummed, rasping his tongue over his teeth, then his lips as he cleaned away every last ounce of the delicacy.

"We can also use it to soothe sore throats," Stumpwhisker explained. "Now, go fetch a stick."

Cragpaw happily grabbed a large segment of the branch that had broken and passed it to his mentor. The older tom jabbed the stick into the broken side of the hive and twisted it. As he twisted it, he pushed it deeper in until it penetrated from the other side, delicate amber liquid oozing around it. Then, with the hive secured to the stick, he passed it back to Cragpaw.

"Find someplace safe to store it, and we'll come back to fetch it after the Gathering."

Cragpaw nodded and grasped it between his teeth, eagerly darting off into the trees to find a place to store the hive.